

Jonah and his Mother

Jonah's mother, Frederika, was born to be young, gay and rich. She still feels young and she still manages to be gay, but not even her perpetual optimism can persuade her that she's still rich. Jonah doesn't exactly hold this against her, for she adores and indulges him, but he considers it a boring situation; and it is the courtly, sad, gentle antique dealer, Gray, who steps in to take care of them.

Gray loses his heart to Jonah, and the management of his home to Frederika. But none of them are happy; Jonah is too young, too spoilt, too ignorant to understand why so much pampering and possessiveness should charm him and Frederika suffers violent punishment for it. The crisis is brought about unwittingly by Susan, a girl who works in a hat shop. But the intervention of an attractive girl does not provide a conventional solution to this delicately ironical novel in which comedy and pathos are most intriguingly blended.

Jonah
and his Mother

Montague Haltrecht



André Deutsch

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The sad boys of the afternoon
pull petals from the park,
throw them at the dying sun
and stroll into the dark.

Poems and Songs

Oh mother . . . you can hide from the past and hide from
the world—but you can't hide from the universe.

Home Sweet Honeycomb

BERNARD KOPS

PROLOGUE

It was mid-afternoon, and Frederika looked around the lounge of the hotel in Kensington where she had shored up. The clerk at the reception desk was nodding, and a middle-aged woman rested her legs on a cretonne pouffe.

'That I should come to this!' Frederika mourned to herself. 'And at my time of life!' she continued, before she could suppress the thought. 'That I should be in a hotel where the clerk has the effrontery not to lower his eyes when I glance in his direction. That I should have to bear the sight of legs in elastic stockings! It's disgusting the way that woman has let herself go. And above all, to be in a hotel lounge in mid-afternoon, and not a man at large! Before this had happened, I wish they had taken me away, put me against a wall, and shot me.'

Frederika lowered herself into an armchair which commanded a view of the entrance.

'What year is it?' she complained to herself. 'I don't like this new world.'

A young man came in and crossed the floor towards her. She looked up with sudden interest. He was a very handsome young man.

'Hello, mummy,' he said. 'Your hair looks wonderful. You were right, it *does* look best red.'

Frederika put her hand to her hair.

'Do you like it, dear? Do you think it suits me?'

She smoothed her hair, then let her hand fall to her throat. She stretched her neck, and tilted her chin till the skin smoothed out.

'Like a bird,' she thought. 'I used to be an exotic bird. They all said so. But I've reached the age of pearls. I have no pearls now. Good-bye pearls. Good-bye all my jewels. Why, oh why, am I harping on my age again?'

She sighed, and her son sat down beside her.

'You all right, mummy?' he asked.

She smiled, and turned her face towards him.

'Yes, of course. Don't I look all right?'

'Yes,' he replied, reassured. 'Now you look all right.'

'Then it's a miracle! That's all I can say. We haven't any money.'

'No, Jonah,' she repeated. 'We haven't any money.' She let her words sink in. 'I've always tried to spare you, Jonah—but the time has come when you must learn something of life. There isn't any money. You are eighteen now, you can't be spared any longer, you have to know such things.'

'Why bring my age into it all of a sudden?'

'Age, age. Time is the enemy,' she crooned. 'Time. And age.'

'Time and age,' Jonah repeated uncertainly.

'Don't frown,' said Frederika. 'Don't look worried. The world is waiting for us, I'm sure of it.'

Jonah looked at her, and she drew a smile from him.

'That's better,' she said. 'Nothing takes the bloom from a face so quickly as worry.' She patted his arm.

'What are you going to do now, mummy?'

'Tonight we're going to the opera. You will wear your suit, and I'll wear my black.'

'And your jewels, mummy?'

'What do you think we have been living off these past weeks?'

'It's so quiet here,' said Jonah. 'It gives me the creeps. I can't understand why you brought me. There's no one here.'

'It's all I can afford.'

'Do you think I'll enjoy it?'

'What?'

'The opera.'

'Darling, of course you will.'

'Because I don't really get much out of music.'

'Life would be nothing without music. I couldn't live without it. I can say when I die—and that day is still a long way off—that at least my life has been full of music. And anyway, we've marvellous seats.'

'It'll be something just to meet *people*. There's no one here.'

'We've got to meet people,' said Frederika. 'It's our last venture.'

'What if . . . ?' Jonah began.

'No ifs,' said Frederika. 'I told you—it is our last venture. Something must happen. Something has always happened before.'

In due course they went upstairs to dress. Frederika stood in her black dress before the mirror, and stroked her throat, and mourned her pearls. Then she went to Jonah's room.

'You look wonderful, mummy,' he said when she entered.

'Not ready yet, Jonah! Good heavens, I've taken less time to get ready than you have. That's a change.'

Jonah looked at her with his large, dark eyes.

'Everything seems to be changing. I can't keep up.'

She watched him as he knotted his tie in front of a full-length mirror.

'The colour is perfect for you,' she said.

'Just as well,' said Jonah. 'My other tie's a bit stringy.'

He pulled on his trousers, and zipped them up in front of the mirror.

'Do try not to drag your trousers along the floor,' said Frederika. 'You'll ruin them. I'm not made of trousers, you know.'

'I don't see how you can put them on without dragging them along the floor.'

He lifted the trousers from inside the waistband, and the creases stood out sharply.

'Nice long legs,' said Frederika. 'I wonder if the trousers are tapered enough. The little tailor could taper them. Better without turn-ups. Shows the length more.'

Jonah looked at his legs in the mirror.

'Now your waistcoat, dear.'

Jonah went to the wardrobe.

'Brush your hair first—you don't want to mess up your clothes.'

'Brushed my hair already,' said Jonah, but nonetheless he picked up his brushes and applied them with slow strokes to his hair. He was aware of his mother's gaze.

He went on brushing his hair with longer strokes, and his interest in his appearance was warmed by his mother's continued attention. He looked at his legs, and at his perfect skin, and at his softly waving hair.

'Come *along* Jonah, we have to be leaving soon.'

Jonah put on his waistcoat, all the time watching himself in the mirror.

'Beautiful colour,' said Frederika. 'I've always loved violet. Shrinking violet.'

She stood before him, and touched his chest very lightly.

'You're a shrinking violet, Jonah. It's part of your charm.'

Without actually touching him, her hand traced the shape of his chest under the waistcoat. Jonah looked into the mirror over her shoulder and saw only himself.

Frederika laughed lightly.

'Now we're ready, I hope. I never knew a boy like you for taking your time. You're more like a girl.'

She laughed again.

'How are we going to get there?' Jonah asked.

'Taxi of course.'

'I thought we hadn't any money.'

'Darling,' said Frederika. 'If you go to the opera you go in the best seats and you go in a taxi. What is the point of going to the opera if you crowd into a bus and sit in the gallery? *Style!*'

They waited in the lounge while the clerk called a taxi.

'Do you know,' said Frederika, 'I've got no confidence in anyone here. I don't even trust that young man to get a taxi. I noticed today—he doesn't know how to behave. He has no dignity. Everyone should have dignity. I've met road-sweepers with more dignity than a duchess.'

'Really?' said Jonah.

'Don't be tiresome, dear.'

'If only you'd said, I could have seen to the taxi.'

'And why may I ask should you have to see to the taxi?'

Frederika fretted and fumed while they waited.

'It's no good your telling me to be patient. Why *should* I be patient? I've never learnt to wait because I've never *had*

to wait. Listen, Jonah, if you ask the right way, you can have anything you want. I don't admire patient women, they only ask to be trodden on. I'd like to see *me* being trodden on! Before that happens, let them take me out and stand me against a wall . . .'

'I didn't tell you to be patient,' said Jonah. 'The taxi won't be long.'

'Tonight of all nights!'

'We're in plenty of time.'

'How can you say that! We're sitting in a hotel in Kensington. How do you know what we might be missing.'

The clerk signalled them from the desk.

'Ah!' said Frederika triumphantly. 'We have a taxi!'

'You see,' said Jonah. 'I said there was no point in getting excited.'

'Don't be irritating—if something is happening, you must get excited! And if nothing's happening, *make* it happen. For heaven's sake, Jonah, you're young, and you sound middle-aged and middle-class. I wish you had a cloak. Wouldn't it suit you!'

Frederika sighed with delight when she saw her taxi, as though she had called it into being with the exercise of great ingenuity. Jonah opened the door, and she stepped inside and sank down on the leather seat.

'Oh,' she said. 'It's luxurious. It's too much. Everyday life doesn't prepare us for taxis. Taxis always take me by surprise.'

'I like them too,' said Jonah.

'I'm worn out,' Frederika sighed, as the taxi drove into the traffic. 'I'm exhausted. I feel a bit desperate, really.'

'Oh, mummy,' said Jonah helplessly. 'What can I do?' Frederika lay back.

'I don't know,' she said. 'All my will and energy is going. What will become of me?'

'Do you want a doctor?' Jonah asked. He touched her cheek nervously, as though he expected to be contaminated by her.

Frederika sank down.

'I'll be all right by the time we get there,' she said. 'I'll just close my eyes. But don't let me fall asleep. If I fall asleep, I don't think I'll ever wake up.'

'Go on mummy, just close your eyes for a moment. I'm sure you'll feel better.'

The windows of the taxi were shut, and Jonah slid the panel which separated them from the driver.

'I love to see the city through glass. I love to see the streets and the buildings and the people. They seem so far away, and so silent. You can't hear them and you can't smell them. We must always go by taxi.'

'What are you talking about?' said Frederika, rousing herself. 'What's all this about glass?'

'I just said I like looking through windows.'

'This is too much!' cried Frederika. 'Open them this minute.'

'I like them closed.'

Frederika reached for the windows.

'I'll open them myself then.'

She struggled with them, without success.

'All right,' said Jonah. 'Let me, I'll do it. Don't get excited. Just lie back and close your eyes.'

He pulled down one of the windows.

'Now the other,' Frederika insisted. 'I'm not dead yet, you know.'

When the taxi pulled up outside the opera house, Frederika

took her purse from her evening bag and gave Jonah some coins. She looked at the meter, and told him how much to tip the driver. Then she stepped out of the taxi, and stood on the pavement, a slight figure beneath the façade of the opera house.

'Whoever would expect to find an opera house in the middle of a common vegetable market,' she said to Jonah, her hand on his arm. 'We English are the most incorrigible people. Don't worry about me, darling. I'm all right now. See,' she said, as they advanced into the foyer, 'the ceiling is quite high—there's nothing to be afraid of.'

'I'm not afraid,' said Jonah.

'Of course not—why ever should you be?'

Frederika breathed deeply, as though she would draw the whole animated scene into her lungs. She laughed, and turned her head with a graceful gesture. Jonah stepped up, and she slipped her wrap off her shoulders into his willing hands.

'Thank you, dear,' she said. 'I'll wait for you here.'

Jonah folded the wrap over his arm, and went to the cloak-room with it while she smiled after his elegant retreating figure.

'The glamour, the excitement, the lights of the opera house,' Frederika said to herself. 'It's almost too much for me already—and that's without the opera itself. May I be spared for many more such evenings.'

She nodded to a music critic. He came to her at once and bent over her outstretched hand as though he noticed no change in her.

'It's my third visit,' she lied. 'And what a lovely voice. I ache all over the moment that woman opens her mouth.'

'You're a connoisseur,' he replied.

'No, no. I'm no connoisseur. But I do respond to beauty'

with all my senses. It makes me drunk—no, really, after the opera I feel quite drunk.'

The music critic withdrew, and Frederika was delighted that she was remembered.

'I like attention,' she thought. 'There's no doubt of that.'

She smiled happily when she saw Jonah making his way towards her again.

'Mummy,' he said, 'what a crowd!'

'Darling,' she whispered. 'Not in public. You mustn't call me mummy in public. You're a big boy now.'

Frederika gave Jonah the tickets, and they went into the auditorium. In the aisle, Frederika bumped rather too roughly for the comfort of either into an elderly lady of her acquaintance. They gripped hands till both were steady.

'My third visit,' Frederika whispered. 'Lovely voice.'

Frederika introduced Jonah, and sent him off for programmes.

'Such a handsome young man,' said the elderly lady.

'Do you think so?' said Frederika.

'Mind you, I remember young men being more manly. In my prime, I used to like them more, how shall I put it, I liked them more hirsute. A little rougher, a little coarser even, that's how I used to like them. How divine they were, the young men when I was young.'

'I daresay,' Frederika responded coldly. 'I never liked them hairy myself. Jonah is fashionable. Fashionable for today, I mean.'

'I don't know what the world's coming to,' said the elderly lady.

Jonah returned, and they took their seats.

'It's so sad,' said Frederika. 'She used to be such a beauty.'

'Who?' asked Jonah. 'Her?'

'Darling!'

The orchestra began tuning up. Frederika glanced at her programme, then folded it and sat with hands clasped on her lap, alert, as though waiting for a miracle.

'When the house lights dim, and the footlights come up, it is a moment of magic, Jonah. I've had many moments of magic in my life.'

'Opera is usually sad, isn't it?' said Jonah.

'Tonight is Bellini. They always suffer in Bellini.'

'They're very good seats,' said Jonah.

The curtain rose on a country scene in pastel shades, and Frederika waited breathlessly for the heroine to appear, to admire her *coiffure*, and the cut of her peasant costume. She sat enraptured while the heroine voiced her hopes of the joy to come.

'Such a line, such a delicious vocal line,' whispered Frederika while the applause rang out for the heroine's first song. 'Bellini is so inventive.'

'Yes,' said Jonah. By the end of the act he was bored. He fidgeted, and watched his mother's expression of rapture with some embarrassment.

When the curtain fell on the first act and the house lights went up, the elderly lady, the former friend of Frederika, rose from her seat a little way ahead of them. She caught Frederika's eye, put her hand to her heart, and sagged. She mouthed words.

'What is she saying? Is she tired?' asked Jonah.

'No,' said Frederika. 'She's saying "lovely voice". Look, can't you see, she's saying it now, "lovely voice".'

And Frederika stood up, and bowed to her former friend, and smiled, then turned and let her gaze take in

the whole brilliant horseshoe of the opera house, alive with lights.

'A wonderful evening, Jonah. I hope you appreciate it.'

'It's all a bit above my head. Is it really so marvellous?'

'Don't worry, dear,' said Frederika, her hand on his shoulder as they went up the aisle. 'You'll grow to love it as I do.'

Frederika stood to one side while Jonah went forward to get coffee for them both. She noticed that he had some difficulty. He seemed unwilling to push.

'I wish he were a little more forceful,' Frederika thought. 'If he were only a little more forceful. My men pushed their way to the front of crowds for me! I don't say more hairy'—the word rose in her mind unbidden—'but certainly more forceful.'

A gentleman emerged from the crowd carrying a cup of coffee, over which he bent his head. He held his cup steady, and seemed to be mesmerized by the steam rising from it. He suddenly came to a halt in front of her, lifted his eyes to hers, then looked over his shoulder in the direction she was looking herself.

'Such a crowd,' he said, shaking his head gently.

'It's always the same,' said Frederika. 'It's a disgrace. I've written to the management over and over again. The facilities are hopelessly inadequate. After all, ours is one of the leading opera houses in the world.'

'Quite,' said the gentleman.

'They take absolutely no notice, of course,' said Frederika. 'What can one do? Still, if more people complained, they'd have to do something. That's the trouble today, not enough people complain. People today accept anything.'

'Quite,' said the gentleman.

'The young man over there is my son,' said Frederika. 'He's trying to get me coffee. There, I think he's being served now.'

'Is he your son?' said the gentleman.

'I do love the opera,' said Frederika. 'After all, in the opera, you get the very best of the international stars. In the ordinary theatre, what do you get? English actors today go on the stage with no voice, no face and no body, and that's what they call acting. When I first went to the theatre it was very different. They had to work in those days. Actors worked and studied all their lives. They had to improve on nature. Today they're just content with what nature gave them, and in most cases that isn't very much, is it?'

'Indeed not. I think your son is trying to get through the crowd to us. I hope he isn't going to spill the coffee. Perhaps I can help him.'

'How kind,' said Frederika. 'How very kind.'

The gentleman stepped forward, took a cup from Jonah's hand, and gave it to Frederika.

'Thank you,' said Frederika.

'This is Jonah,' said Frederika. 'I'm trying to teach him to appreciate the opera.'

'Enjoying it?' the gentleman asked.

'Yes,' said Jonah uncertainly, looking at his mother for guidance.

'I've been going to the opera for years now—it's part of my life,' said Frederika. 'This woman we're hearing tonight—first-rate. I doubt the part has even been better sung.'

'I remember when I first heard the opera,' said the gentleman, 'Pagliughi. Lina Pagliughi. She was first-rate.'

'You heard Pagliughi!' exclaimed Frederika. 'How jealous I am!'

'In those days people talked only of Tettrazzini. They still remembered her. I don't suppose,' and he turned to Jonah, 'that you have even heard of these singers.'

'I'm sorry,' said Jonah.

'The singers today are every bit as good.' The gentleman smiled. 'If older people tell you any different, don't believe them. When we talk of the glories of the past, it's our own youth we're thinking of.'

'This woman,' said Frederika, firmly, 'is first-rate. There can't be any argument about that.'

The interval bell went.

'Oh,' exclaimed Frederika, 'we must be getting back to our seats. We mustn't be late.'

'Don't worry,' said the gentleman, 'that's only the first bell. We've five minutes.'

He took Frederika's empty cup from her hand and went with it to the counter. Jonah followed him with his own cup.

'Do you know the story of the second act?' the gentleman asked him.

'No,' said Jonah. 'I should have read the programme.'

'Have you a programme?' asked the gentleman. 'Would you like mine?'

He took a programme, neatly folded, from the inside pocket of his jacket.

'Thank you very much,' said Jonah, 'but I've got one.'

He took his own from the inside pocket of his jacket and showed it.

'Do read it quickly then. And be sure and let me know next interval whether you liked it. I think there are one or two things in it you should enjoy.'

When they went back to the auditorium, Jonah trailed

behind Frederika in the aisle, reading the second act synopsis as he went.

'Hurry along, Jonah,' said Frederika. 'Don't dawdle.'

'You're always in such a hurry. I've got to know what the opera's about.'

He folded his programme carefully this time before he put it back in his pocket. 'I think I'll like this act more than the first.'

Jonah did not fidget through the second act. After the quintet, Frederika put her hand on Jonah's knee.

'Oh, darling,' she said. 'You have not heard the human voice in all its beauty and all its dignity until you have heard it in sorrow.'

'I expect so,' said Jonah. 'I did quite enjoy that.'

All around them the house was exploding with applause.

'You listened so nicely,' said Frederika when the curtain fell. 'You're a real credit to me.'

They rose to leave their seats, and as they rose, the elderly lady ahead of them, who had already risen to applaud, caught their eye and staggered again.

'Too beautiful,' she mouted.

'Unearthly,' Frederika mouted back.

She pushed her way impatiently along the row of seats and out into the aisle.

'Do hurry, Jonah,' she urged him. 'You've been very good, don't spoil it now.'

Their gentleman accosted them as soon as they emerged from the auditorium.

'Voila!' he exclaimed. 'What a lucky chance among so many people! I could easily have missed you.'

'It must be destiny,' laughed Frederika.

'I hope you enjoyed that act,' he said to Jonah.

'My son was so moved,' said Frederika, 'that in the end he couldn't bring himself to watch the stage at all.'

'Goodness—you must be very sensitive.'

'He is sensitive,' said Frederika. 'Darling, you look quite flushed. It's been too much for him,' she said laughing, and she took out her handkerchief and wiped his brow. 'Don't wriggle darling'—she smiled at the gentleman as she dabbed—'straighten your tie.'

Jonah did not wriggle, but submitted to his mother's attentions sulkily. He straightened his tie, and Frederika put her head on one side to look at him.

'That's better,' she said.

Jonah lowered his eyes, and they both continued to look at him.

'He's a very apt pupil,' thought Frederika. 'He's so like me—anyone can see that he's a son of mine.'

Meanwhile the gentleman was bowing slightly and inviting them to dinner.

'How very charming,' said Frederika, aflutter. 'Isn't that charming, Jonah?'

The gentleman bowed again slightly, towards Jonah this time.

'What do you say, Jonah?' he asked.

'Well,' thought Frederika. 'A strange new world indeed, when it matters what Jonah says!'

'I'd like to go myself,' Jonah said to her. 'But only if you want to, of course. As long as it's not too late for you.'

'Darling!' she replied. 'Too late for me! We'd both be delighted,' she said to the gentleman.

'My pleasure,' said the gentleman, hand on heart, and still looking at Jonah.

'What's this?' thought Frederika suddenly. A faint flush

suffused Jonah's cheek. The effect was charming. 'I can't believe it,' she thought. 'He knows how to please already. And he's far too young to know.'

Frederika was proud of him. At the same time she was a little uneasy, for this was a new Jonah to her.

Meanwhile Jonah opened his mouth, about to speak. He was trying to overcome his shyness.

'Were you going to say something?' their gentleman asked.

'I was,' Jonah admitted. 'Before you asked us to supper.'

'What was it?'

He smiled encouragingly.

'I don't know that I should say it now. I don't want to be difficult.'

'What is it, Jonah?' Frederika asked him.

Jonah blushed again, and hesitated.

'I'm sorry I spoke at all.'

'You don't have to be afraid,' said the gentleman.

'What is it, Jonah?' his mother repeated.

'I am enjoying the opera,' said Jonah earnestly. 'I don't want you to think I'm not. But I feel I've had enough for one evening.'

Jonah looked quickly at Frederika, but appealed to the gentleman.

'How selfish of us!' exclaimed the gentleman. 'You're new to opera. It's so long since we first went to the opera ourselves,' he said to Frederika, 'that we've forgotten how tiring it can be if you're not used to it.'

'You mean you want us to leave now?' said Frederika.

'Oh, come—the last act is the opera.'

'Oh well all right, then,' said Jonah, awkwardly. 'I'd rather we did stay.'

'There will be plenty more evenings at the opera,' said the gentleman. 'And two acts of Bellini are quite enough for you to be getting along with. It would be a pity if you were put off opera for life, just for the sake of one act.'

'True,' replied Frederika doubtfully. 'I suppose *Bohème* would have been an easier opera for a beginner.'

'If you like,' said Jonah, 'you could see the last act and I could wait out here.'

'Don't be absurd!' said Frederika. 'We'll go.'

'You're sure you don't mind?'

'I think it would be best,' said the gentleman.

'If you're sure . . .' Jonah began.

'Let's not discuss it any more,' Frederika said decisively.

'Run along to the cloakroom, will you, and get my wrap? Perhaps,' and she smiled at him, 'perhaps our friend has something you could fetch at the same time?'

'How very kind.' The gentleman gave Jonah his cloakroom ticket, and when Jonah had gone, he said, 'I think it's time I introduced myself properly. My name is Gray Linton. I'm so delighted to have met you.'

'Gray,' repeated Frederika, smiling. 'Yes, I think you look like a Gray,' she decided.

When Jonah returned, Frederika introduced the gentleman by name.

'Your son's name I know, of course. Jonah.'

'And I'm Frederika,' she added.

Jonah threw the wrap over his mother's shoulders, and helped Gray into his coat.

'You've no coat, Jonah,' said Gray. 'You'd better stay here then with your mother while I go for a taxi.'

He went out immediately, and in a moment the interval bell rang and the foyer began to empty.

Frederika looked at Jonah critically.

'Straighten your tie,' she said. 'And comb your hair, quickly, before Gray gets back.'

She put her hand to her own hair, knowing as she did so that she was herself still immaculate.

'Do get a move on, Jonah.'

But he had spotted a mirror in a corner of the foyer, and he walked over to it. Frederika watched him, and he was still combing his hair when Gray came back. Jonah seemed unaware that he was being watched. He put his comb away slowly and looked at his tie.

'Jonah!' she called across the now empty foyer.

He turned to look at them, and adjusted his tie without haste. Then he came over towards them.

'The taxi is waiting,' Gray said to him. 'Shall we go?'

Frederika crossed quickly from the opera house to the taxi. She was in the open, under the mild evening sky, for only a moment. She noted how Gray held the door open for her, and how he gave instructions to the driver.

'I have always admired style in men,' she thought. 'It's the way they do the little things which is so important. It's simply not enough to be fine in a crisis.'

'Tonight,' said Gray, 'I have been able to escape a little from the present. The opera always has that effect on me. Of course, the right company helps too.'

'You're too kind,' Frederika murmured.

'I deal in antiques, you know. The past intrigues me.'

'How exciting,' said Frederika. 'And where is your shop?'

'Beauchamp Place.'

'Excellent,' said Frederika thoughtfully.

'Are you interested in antiques at all?' Gray said to Jonah.

'I don't know much about it,' Jonah answered apologetically.

'You don't have to know anything—you just follow your instinct.'

'I'm sure you have exquisite taste,' said Frederika. 'It must be wonderful, always to be surrounded by beautiful objects. How I envy you!'

'I'm lucky in one way. If there's anything in the shop I fall in love with, I can always take it home with me for a while.'

'You must have a most beautiful home,' said Frederika.

'I'd love you to see it,' said Gray.

When the taxi stopped, Frederika got out and pushed her wrap high about her throat. She waited for Gray to pay off the driver and lead her in.

'I always over-tip myself,' she said. 'For an extra sixpence, one can be an aristocrat. It's worth it.'

'I'm hungry,' said Jonah.

Gray hurried forward at once and opened the restaurant door. Jonah would have gone straight in, in front of his mother, had not her indignant voice stopped him.

'Jonah!' she cried. 'Really!'

Jonah started, and stepped back.

'I don't know what Gray will think of us,' she said archly. She turned in the doorway to look at her son for a moment. Jonah hung his head. 'His manners are usually beautiful,' she said to Gray.

'I forgot,' said Jonah.

'I should just say you did!' She laughed lightly and passed into the restaurant.

Inside, looking about her, she congratulated Gray on his choice, though in fact she found the room chilling. She felt insignificant.

'I mustn't take too long making my mind up,' she laughed, as they were poring over the menu. 'Jonah will die of hunger if he doesn't have his food immediately.'

'The appetite of youth,' sighed Gray.

Frederika carefully composed her meal, and when she had finished Jonah told Gray what he wanted and Gray ordered exactly the same for himself.

'How dreadful I look. You must excuse me,' said Frederika. Gray and Jonah got up, and a waiter darted forward to pull out the table. She swept away from them with a backward glance, during which she noted Gray's soft smile and his bow as he began at once to lower himself into his seat again. Jonah stood with downcast eyes. She turned again to look at them from the end of the room, before she disappeared into the ladies' room, and saw their heads over the table leaning towards each other.

When she returned, Jonah was drinking soup and Gray was leaning forward to watch him, so that neither noticed her approach.

'Ah,' said Gray, standing up. 'I made Jonah begin. I knew you wouldn't mind.'

'Were you really so hungry?' she asked.

'I insisted,' said Gray, before Jonah could reply.

'You're very considerate,' said Frederika, a little sharply.

Jonah had to get up when the waiter pulled back the table again for her, but he kept his eyes lowered.

'I feel quite hungry myself now,' said Frederika. 'I'm looking forward to the meal.'

She determined to be bright.

'My goodness, this looks delicious,' she exclaimed, as the soup plates were cleared and the main course was laid in front of them. She tasted the meat. 'Delicious indeed,' she pronounced.

Gray glanced at Jonah, then leaned towards Frederika.

'I'm so glad you're enjoying it,' he said simply. 'I was telling Jonah before that there's a party we could go on to after supper. He's dying to come. Perhaps you would like to come as well.'

'As well,' she thought. She suddenly felt old.

'It will be a quiet affair,' Gray was saying. 'It would be so nice if you could come.'

The two men watched attentively. They hung on her reply.

'It's so kind of you to ask us,' she said. 'I would hate to spoil the fun.'

She paused, and there was a short silence.

'You're coming then?' Gray asked at last, and Frederika could detect anxiety in his voice, but not eagerness for her company.

'I don't think so,' she said lightly. Dignity became the most important thing in life for her. 'I'm tired. I've enjoyed our evening so much, but now I think it's time for Jonah to take me home.'

'But I want to go to the party,' said Jonah stubbornly.

Frederika looked at him coldly. His boldness seemed to have taken him by surprise, and he appealed to Gray silently for support.

'Another day, Jonah,' she said. 'There'll be plenty more parties.'

She waited for Gray to intercede.

'Never mind, Jonah,' he said, putting a hand on his arm.
'Your mother is quite right. It is late.'

He began to eat again, as though he would not delay Frederika by a moment. Frederika was deflated.

'I'm sorry if I'm a spoilsport,' she said, half regretting her decision.

'Of course you're not,' said Gray. 'I quite understand.'

'I'm not tired,' Jonah persisted nonetheless. 'I could go alone.'

'I wasn't going to suggest that,' said Gray quickly. 'I can understand that you wouldn't want your son to go out alone with a perfect stranger.'

'It's not that,' said Frederika. 'But Jonah's very young, and he's always been with me. He's not even been away to school.'

'Quite,' said Gray.

'But I want to go,' said Jonah.

'Really!' said Frederika. 'I've already said no.'

Gray smiled indulgently.

'It is so hard for the young to submit to authority.'

'Quite,' said Frederika, beginning to be charmed again.
'We parents sacrifice everything, and do we get any gratitude for it? Mind you, I ask nothing in return. Just a little respect.'

'You're too good,' said Gray.

Frederika gained confidence. 'You're most ungrateful, Jonah,' she scolded him. 'Another boy would be thrilled to be taken to the opera. And you sit there sulking because I won't let you go to a party! What does he look like?' she asked, laughing.

'It's true,' said Gray, 'he is sulking.'

'You see,' said Frederika. 'I can't let him go now, can I? I must be firm. I've said no, and no it must be.'

'I'm not two years old,' said Jonah fiercely between his teeth.

'I'm sorry I suggested it,' said Gray apologetically.

'I know you meant well,' said Frederika. 'Now you see what a mother has to put up with.' She was sure of his sympathy.

'A mother's lot!' sighed Gray. 'Who would be a mother?'

'So few people understand.' Frederika shook her head, happy again.

'I'm not a child, mother,' said Jonah. 'It's time you realised.'

'What a fuss for a party,' laughed Gray. Frederika decided to laugh too, and the atmosphere relaxed. 'I tell you what,' said Gray.

'Yes?' Frederika asked.

'Look, let's not spoil the evening. We'll take you home in a taxi, then I'll take Jonah along to the party for an hour or so, and I'll deliver him back to you safe and sound. How's that?'

Frederika looked at Jonah's sulky handsome face, and at Gray. 'What a spoilt child it is!' she laughed, shaking her head.

She hesitated, but did not want to destroy the picture of herself that she had created. Gray had charmed her, and she herself, she was confident, had charmed him. She yielded with grace.

'What can I answer?' she said, helplessly. 'I'm sure it's very bad for him. We shouldn't give way to him like this. But I'm only a poor helpless woman, as you see. He badly needs a man's influence, I'm afraid. I've done my best with him, all these years, but I sometimes wonder if I've really succeeded.'

'Come,' Gray reassured her. 'You've done a wonderful job. He's young, and he wants to spread his wings a little. Where's the harm?'

'Perhaps you're right. It's so hard to know.'

'You must be firm, and you must know when to give way. It's the whole secret of life.'

'Perhaps you're right,' said Frederika in a pale voice. She was enjoying being pliant.

'So he can come then?' said Gray.

'Yes,' Frederika consented finally.

'Thank your mother,' said Gray.

'Thank you,' said Jonah quietly.

'Naughty boy,' she said roguishly. 'And you mustn't thank me, you must thank Gray. And don't think you'll always get your own way like this.'

The meal ended more cheerfully. Frederika did not regret letting Jonah go, not even when the taxi put her down at the hotel and she watched them drive off.

She turned and went into the hotel alone, past the nodding clerk at the reception desk and into the lounge. It was a mild evening, but she felt slightly chilled, and drew her wrap about her shoulders.

'What a change,' she thought. 'Now it's me waiting up for Jonah to come home. It's the first time.'

She wondered whether she would enjoy acting the fond mother. At least she was confident that she had made a good impression on Gray, and on the whole she felt that that was the main thing.

'I hope Jonah enjoys himself,' she thought. 'I do really.' Time passed.

'It's a funny thing,' she thought. 'But I miss him. I would be quite lonely without him.'

And she wondered if after all it had been such a good thing to let him go.

And yet she was confident that something would come of their meeting with Gray. She was a little happier about the future.

The lounge was almost empty. There was no one there to interest her. But she did not want to go up to bed before Jonah got back. She dozed fitfully in an armchair.

'We'll just stop by at my flat,' Gray said as the taxi drove away from the hotel. 'It's on the way. I'd like to change into something casual. Besides, I want you to see it.'

'I'd like to,' said Jonah.

But Jonah was disappointed when the taxi stopped and he found himself in the centre of a quiet residential area. He regretted the chic, warmly-lit restaurant they had left, and wished they had gone straight from there to the party.

Gray noticed his disapproval.

'I've lived here for many years,' he explained. 'It was once very fashionable. Now of course fashion has passed on, and we're a backwater. Life is just a noise in the distance. I like it that way. All this'—his arm indicated the graceful curve of the crescent—'has a certain charm, don't you think?'

The massive stucco fronts, with their square-cut porches, and the little plane trees in front of them, were illuminated by the street-lamps. There was no one about, and when the taxi drove off, the crescent was deserted. It was like a stage-set.

'I suppose it has,' said Jonah.

'We'll go up, shall we?'

Jonah was at home immediately in the flat, among the many objects of value. Gray saw Jonah in this new setting with delight. The sitting-room especially—with its tapestries and its rugs and not an inch of distemper in sight—was scarcely a room at all to Jonah: it was more like a luxurious cavern, though badly in need of an airing.

'You like it?' Gray asked anxiously.

'Yes,' said Jonah.

'I'll get you a drink.'

Jonah curled up on the huge sofa and hugged his glass.

'It's wonderful being anywhere without mother,' he said.
'You handled her magnificently.'

'Very charming woman,' said Gray, feeling his way carefully.

'Just you try living with her. She drives me mad. I could kill her sometimes.'

Jonah stretched himself luxuriously, and reminded Gray of some splendid young animal.

'Oh, come,' Gray said fatuously.

'I'm fed up being told how marvellous she is. I wish she weren't so marvellous.' Jonah began to get heated. 'You saw how she bossed me about tonight—as though I were a child. She's going to get a shock one day!'

'I'm sure she is.'

Gray smiled indulgently, but stopped when he saw the look on Jonah's face.

'Let me put on a record for you,' he said. 'Anything in particular you'd like?'

'I've had enough music for one night. I've had enough of mother and enough of music. Please don't try and ram them down my throat. I'm an ungrateful son and I'm a philistine—I've heard it a hundred times and I don't care.'

'I didn't mean to upset you,' said Gray, with genuine concern. 'I had no idea how you felt.' He hovered about Jonah anxiously.

'I'm sorry if I was rude.' Jonah was shamefaced. 'It's just that I'm so fed up. It hasn't got anything to do with you. You can't think how wonderful it is to be asked out somewhere without mother. No one's ever taken any notice of me for myself. I've always been just Frederika's son. If they were nice to me, it was only because they were interested in mother.'

Gray sat down on the edge of the sofa.

'I'm only interested in you for yourself,' he said. 'I had no idea how things were. You poor boy.'

'And now there's no money. That doesn't help. Mother's become a bag of nerves. She takes it out on me. She won't let anyone else see how worried she is, of course.'

'Short of money as well,' said Gray thoughtfully. 'Life hasn't been any fun for you, has it?'

'I'm sorry to let it all out on you like this.' said Jonah. 'After all, I hardly know you. And you've already been very kind.'

Gray poured out more drinks. He sighed.

'We'd better be getting along to the party soon. I promised your mother I'd deliver you home early.'

'Let's not go just yet,' said Jonah.

An hour later they were still in the flat.

'I think it's time to be going,' said Gray. 'I did promise your mother. Perhaps we'll all meet again soon. It wouldn't do to upset her right at the beginning.'

He got up, but Jonah did not move.

'It's nice to be with someone who seems to care,' said Jonah, like a waif. 'I don't feel like going.'

'Don't think I want you to go,' said Gray. 'But there it is. It's late, and your mother's expecting you.'

'Let her expect,' said Jonah.

'She's waiting up for you,' Gray smiled gently. He moved to the sofa to help Jonah to his feet. 'You're not just a little tipsy, are you?'

'I'm not tipsy at all,' said Jonah. He got to his feet without assistance. 'I can hold drink all right. It's one of the few useful things that mother taught me. Let her go on waiting. I don't want to go home. Why should I—to that stinking dump?'

'I've got a spare room,' said Gray doubtfully. 'You could always sleep in the spare room. But we ought at least to telephone and let your mother know. She'll be anxious.'

'I don't care if she is.' Jonah spoke in low, measured tones, looking hard at Gray. 'Are you shocked?'

'A little,' Gray admitted.

'Now what about this spare room?'

'Oh yes—the spare room.'

'Lucky,' said Jonah with a light laugh—'that you've got a spare room. But I hope I like it.'

PART ONE

Jonah woke early next morning, and found himself in a new bed. Gray was beside him, and the sun shone through the net curtains, making a thin, strange light.

'A new day,' was Jonah's first thought. 'It must have been like this on the morning of creation.'

The milkman was in the street below, and Jonah listened to the clink of milk bottles. He knew the sound, and listened to it for a while, to reassure himself that the world was going on as it had before. To him the world would never again be the same.

He did not think of Gray as he looked about him. The bed in which he lay was rather low, and had no headboard, and the wall opposite the bed was bare except for a single black and white print. There was a small chest of drawers in a corner, and beside the bed was a white rug. Jonah lay still and looked up at the ceiling, for there was nothing in the room worth looking at. He heard the sound of cars in the distance, and the rattle of a train occasionally. The world was waking up, and he felt ready for it.

Gray stirred beside him. Jonah pushed his pillow higher against the wall behind the bed, and half sat up, so that he could look down on Gray while he woke up.

Gray opened his eyes, blinking like a defenceless child. He

focused on Jonah's bare breast, which filled his vision, and for a moment was everything to him. Then his mind came to life, and Jonah could see suspicion and defensiveness cover his face; Gray became again the man he had met the evening before.

'Hello,' Gray said, in a soft voice.

'Hello,' said Jonah, looking down. There was something else now in Gray's face.

'How are you feeling?' Gray asked, and though he smiled, Jonah was not deceived. The voice was tentative, Jonah smelt fear in this man, and he enjoyed it. He said nothing. Gray put out a hand to him under the bedclothes, frowned, withdrew it. He lifted his head to listen, and sighed, and relaxed again.

'I didn't mean any of this to happen,' he said. Jonah shrugged his shoulders. 'Not like this. I didn't know you—I didn't know anything about you. That's not how these things should be done.'

'It doesn't matter,' said Jonah. He felt nothing for Gray. Gray was not associated with the opera house, with all that had happened since the opera house. Gray was a stranger to him: why were they together in the same bed, naked in the morning?

'What are you thinking about?' Gray asked.

'Nothing.' Jonah looked at Gray's head. Gray became clear, and more distant. 'No, that's not true. I'm thinking about mother.'

Gray drew away from him.

Jonah smiled. 'You don't have to be afraid of mother,' he said.

'Afraid?'

The sun was higher in the sky. Jonah got out of bed and

went to the window. He thrust aside the net curtain. The trees frothed in the light breeze, and there was more traffic now, though it was still distant, for the crescent was out of the stream of city life. Jonah listened to the trees soughing noisily, and to the distant hooting of the traffic. All was well.

Gray, in a dressing-gown, was standing beside him. He put up his hands to embrace Jonah as the sunlight streamed in on him, no longer a thin unearthly light, but a full, rosy glow on the boy's flesh. Jonah looked at him indifferently, and Gray dropped his hands.

'Breakfast?' Gray asked. He bowed very slightly, formally: Jonah remembered how he had bowed at the opera house when he first accosted them. It amused Jonah to be standing there at the window naked, and have Gray before him in a dressing-gown once more a stranger. Jonah had never known power before.

As Gray watched him, Jonah walked insolently across the floor, felt the softness of the white rug under his feet, and stepped back into bed. He drew the covers up to his chin. Later, Gray brought in the breakfast tray with boiled eggs and tea on it.

Jonah was sitting up in bed, and Gray sat on the bed near him.

'How do you feel?' Gray asked for the second time.

'All right,' said Jonah.

He was the more self-possessed of the two.

'I didn't mean things to happen so quickly—I had every intention of sending you back to your mother last night.'

Jonah laughed. Gray looked hurt, and Jonah put his hand lightly on Gray's.

'I suppose you want me to cry and upbraid you. I can't. I

don't blame you for a thing. Were you hoping that I would ?' Gray said nothing. ' If it's any consolation to you, I couldn't have been more innocent—no one had ever laid a finger on me before. But I can't upbraid you, because everything turned out exactly as I want. When I came here, I wanted to be seduced. Are you disappointed ?'

Gray looked at him curiously. Jonah could see him struggling with himself, deciding whether to hide his feelings or to speak out.

' I'd prefer you to cry, yes,' he said, opting for truth. ' Then I could comfort you. We could grow closer like that.'

' What do you want from me now ?'

Jonah put his hands on Gray's shoulders, and drew him near, so that their faces almost touched. The breakfast tray was between them, rocking dangerously.

' I want to go on making love to you,' said Gray. ' You move me very much.'

Jonah looked mockingly into Gray's eyes.

' I won't resist,' he said.

' Stay with me,' said Gray. ' Please. Stay as long as you like. I want you.'

' I'll stay,' said Jonah. ' But I want mother here with me,' he added, as though it were an afterthought.

' Your mother ! I thought you wanted to be free of her ! You only came with me in the first place so that you could get away from her. And now you're away from her at last, you want to be with her again. You've only been away from her a single night ! '

Jonah shrugged.

Gray put the tray on the floor and leaned over towards him.

'I won't argue. I won't persuade you. Anything you want, darling, anything.'

Jonah pushed him away.

'Darling!' he repeated, laughing. 'How ridiculous you are!' He saw that Gray was hurt. He went on laughing. 'I'm going to phone mother. Will you look up the hotel number in the phone book?'

'Can't it wait?' Gray pressed closer to Jonah. 'I've got to go out soon. Phone her after I've gone.'

Jonah laughed again.

'But think how worried mother will be—poor mother!'

He let Gray kiss him, then pushed him away, more gently, but firmly.

'Please,' he said. 'The number.'

Gray brought in the telephone directory from the hall, and dialled the number himself. Jonah reached across for the phone, which was on a small table on the far side of the bed, where Gray had slept.

'Where are you?' Frederika shrieked down the phone. 'I've been out of my mind with worry. I haven't slept. Do you think I could sleep while you were away, and I didn't know what might have happened to you? I sat in the lounge till the small hours, I dozed off, I woke up feeling chilled, so stiff, such a headache! I thought of calling the police. You were with a strange man—anything might have happened! I went up to bed at last—I lay awake—I was frantic. I look so terrible this morning. How could you be so thoughtless? What happened?'

'If you want to know,' said Jonah, 'you must be quiet for a moment. I can't tell you otherwise.'

Frederika was stunned. Jonah held the phone to his ear and waited.

Gray put his hand on Jonah's chest.

'Where are you?' Frederika asked in a different voice.

'I stayed the night in Gray's flat,' he said. 'There's nothing the matter.'

'Why didn't you phone to let me know? And how dare you stay out all night.'

'We didn't go to the party after all.'

'Why not?'

'We decided not to. Then it got late, so I stayed. We didn't phone the hotel because it was too late by that time.'

Frederika began to talk again. Gray slipped off his dressing-gown, got into bed, and put his arm round Jonah.

'I've got to go out soon,' he said, his mouth close to Jonah's face.

'You don't answer me!' Frederika cried.

'Wait a minute!' Jonah whispered to Gray, giggling. 'Stop that!'

'What's the matter?' Frederika's despairing voice came through the phone.

Jonah flung out his arm, still clutching the receiver in his hand. He lay back as Gray stroked his hair and arms, and listened to his mother's voice squeaking in the distance.

'This is no way to behave,' said Gray angrily, when he had finished with Jonah. He got out of bed and began dressing at once. 'I'm already late.'

Jonah watched him with an amused gleam in his eyes, and languidly put the phone to his ear again.

'Are you still there, mother?' he asked.

'I can't stand any more of this!' cried Frederika. 'I want you home at once. What is going on?'

'A hotel is not a home,' said Jonah lightly. 'Why'—and

he watched Gray, who paused—‘why don’t you come over here?’

Gray said nothing. Frederika was silent.

‘What do you say, mother?’ Jonah asked casually.

‘I don’t know if I can,’ said Frederika icily.

‘I’ll probably be going out for a little while. I’ll be back by midday. Why don’t you come over then?’

He asked Gray the address of the flat: Gray stopped dressing and gave it to him.

‘Mother might just as well come here,’ Jonah said to him, without bothering to cover the mouthpiece with his hand.

Jonah listened while his mother talked, smiling, with his eyes clouded. He was alone with the telephone.

‘Is she coming?’ Gray asked when Jonah rang off.

Jonah started at the sound of his voice.

‘At about one. She wouldn’t come when I suggested—she’s got nothing to do—she’s just given herself an extra hour to sit biting her nails. She’s maintaining her dignity at all costs.’

‘What are you going to do till then?’

Gray returned to his dressing. He pretended not to care greatly what Jonah replied.

‘Perhaps I’ll come with you,’ said Jonah. He got out of bed and began to dress himself.

‘If you like.’

‘My suit’s still creased,’ said Jonah in the taxi. ‘I feel a bit uncomfortable in it.’

‘We’re late,’ said Gray. ‘I’m never late for business. Don’t worry about the suit—when I’ve opened the shop, we’ll go out and buy you one or two things.’

Frederika had not been asleep when the call was put

through to her bedroom. She had been lying in bed with the curtains drawn, not wanting to know what time it was.

'Only yesterday,' she mused, 'he was a child. He followed me everywhere, from room to room. He had such pretty ways. But there were times when he was a positive nuisance. We've been through a lot together. I nursed him in all his illnesses. When he was sick, I wouldn't trust anyone else to look after him. Now he's different. He's grown up. I'm different too. This hotel is not what I have got used to over the years. But we can't put the clock back. I've never wanted to before.'

Her mind was full of the absent Jonah. There had been many men, but one child only, one Jonah.

'My first thoughts were always for him. When I was with a man, living in his home, or in an apartment specially arranged for me, my first concern always was for Jonah. I've lived for my son—he has been the single, bright thread in my life.'

Then Jonah phoned her—cruel, suggestive, a new Jonah. He had always seemed so considerate of her feelings up to this day, attentive, almost to a fault, timid, as though there were not sufficient life force buried in him. And now, in a moment, he was away from her, and as careless of her feelings as though she were not his mother at all. She had worried about him all night, worried for him her whole life—and now he treated her with contempt.

She rose from her bed, and swept back the curtains. The light troubled her, and she sat down on the bed with her hand over her eyes. Then she sat resolutely in front of the mirror.

Before she took stock of herself, she noted sadly the wretched dressing-table with its cheap veneer. She didn't

know her life any more. She looked at her hair and eyes and skin, her face and her neck.

'Most women in my position would have had an abortion. I was thirty-five. Men don't want women with babies. He was ten years old when I was forty-five: it doesn't help women in my position to have children trailing after them. But I liked having Jonah with me. I don't know why. Even after he was born, people advised me to have him adopted. But I needed someone to love, someone of my own. It was no use loving men who didn't care for me, who were only transitory.'

'Jonah has had all my love. I have been good to him, only to him. And now, suddenly, he feels no need of me. He's changed, everything has changed.'

She applied make-up, forcing her hand to be steady.

Sad thoughts revolved in her head. She tried to concentrate her attention on the image in the mirror, on the immediate present.

Gray's assistant was a nondescript young man in a pin-stripe suit, and he was waiting for them when they arrived in Beauchamp Place. Gray nodded to him briskly, and went quickly up the two steps to the shop, while Jonah looked in at the window. He saw a cabinet marked 'Fine Lacquer Cabinet—William and Mary Period (1690)—£165'. A table, a small wooden circle on a single leg, was marked 'A Regency Wine Table—£82 10s'. Between them was an armchair covered in orange velvet. On it was the simple legend, 'Please do not sit.'

Jonah skipped up the two steps behind the assistant. The shop was small and badly lit. Gray was looking around. He touched a settle, moved a bowl on top of a sideboard. There

were not many objects in the shop, yet it seemed crowded, for most were of dark, polished wood. Gray went among them anxiously.

'Everything just as you left it?' Jonah asked mockingly.

'I hate being late!' said Gray. He seemed to gain stature in his shop.

Jonah went to the wine-table. '£82 10s seems a funny price—and it doesn't look much for the money.'

'Oh, that!' said Gray.

He offered no explanation.

'A chair is for sitting on, isn't it?' Jonah fingered the velvet.

Gray began to relax a little.

'You get a different type of people in the shop these days. You get American tourists and the new rich. They don't know how to behave. You have to treat them like children. It used to be different. Queen Mary used to come to Beauchamp Place. She's been into this shop. She was a wonderful old lady. Such dignity. You don't get many like her today!'

Jonah shrugged.

'Beauchamp Place! You've no idea what it used to be like. You didn't have any of these dress shops. It was exclusive. It was really beautiful. People who came here knew what they were looking at. "William and Mary Period (1690)".' He picked up the card on the cabinet. 'I didn't have to tell people these things! People today don't know anything.'

'I suppose they don't,' said Jonah.

He sat down on the settle, which was none too comfortable, while Gray went through to the room behind the shop. He heard Gray talking to the assistant. When he returned, his manner was still more assured, and Jonah felt for a moment slightly insignificant, beneath the notice of a man marked

with the mystery of business and affairs. He was relieved when they left the shop.

In the street, Gray once more returned to something like his proper size. As they walked along, Gray looked over his shoulder once or twice, as though an invisible cord were drawing him back to the shop. Jonah noted this, and found it strange, for he himself had never cared particularly for any one place. When he left a place, he never regretted it. He didn't know what it was to want to return anywhere. Nor could he recall ever having looked forward to going to a new place.

Gray resisted the pull of his shop, and soon they were out of Beauchamp Place and well away in the main Brompton Road.

Gray took Jonah's arm. Jonah felt immensely valuable. He had a protector who was going to lavish care and expense on his body. He was all the more disappointed when Gray led him into a small men's shop, for he had expected something magnificent.

On the counter was a tray of silk scarves.

'Mother would love those,' he said.

'Maybe,' said Gray.

An assistant came forward, a middle-aged man in rimless spectacles. Gray spoke to him, and he went to a hanging case and drew back a curtain. Jonah's heart beat faster when he saw a row of suede sleeves, gracefully inanimate. He unbuttoned his jacket, and Gray helped him off with it. The assistant took a suede jacket from the rail and slid it over his arms, fitted it on his shoulders, smoothed it over his chest. He paraded across the floor and looked in the mirror. He looked especially at his face—it ought to have a new tone, a new bloom, above the dark suede.

Gray sat on a chair and appraised him. He had Jonah's old jacket across his knees. The assistant moved about discreetly between them, gauging their feelings. Jonah tried several, and in each he came to rest finally in front of Gray, waiting for approval.

When he went into a fitting room to try on a pair of trousers, the assistant held the waist near the ground, so that he had hardly to lift his leg to step into them. In the complete outfit, he stood in front of Gray and turned around.

On the counter, beside the scarves, were trays of ties. Gray's fingers darted among them, and he drew up, sparkling, as though from the deep, bands of silk. He knotted them quickly round his fingers, and held them to Jonah's throat. Three were selected, paid for and wrapped, and when they were again in the street, Jonah was laden with parcels.

Jonah blinked in the daylight. The movement frightened him for a moment. He was like a sleepwalker suddenly woken.

'I must go back now,' said Gray.

Jonah was dismissed.

'How will I get into the flat?' he asked.

Gray took out a bunch of keys and detached one from the ring.

'Use this. There's a spare one at home somewhere. I'll look for it tonight. You'll be at home about six to let me in?'

Jonah took the key and watched Gray walk off down the road, without turning back to look at him.

'I say,' he called after Gray; running towards him. 'I've no money.'

It seemed the most natural thing in the world to ask for money.

Gray took out his wallet.

'I'm sorry to have kept you away from your shop,' said Jonah.

Gray looked at him.

'It's my daily bread—I mustn't neglect it.'

'I won't ask you again to leave the shop during business hours.'

And Jonah went home to dress up for his mother coming.

When Jonah opened the door to his mother, she looked to him tiny, slight, rather pretty—she was smiling up at him from under her lashes.

'You're late,' he said.

Frederika was determined at all costs not to show her uncertainty, above all to the son who to that moment had relied on her for everything.

'About half-an-hour late. I'm sorry. I couldn't find a cab.'

Jonah stood aside for her to pass. She stepped inside the flat hesitantly. This would not be the first adventure of her life. But she felt that a future of loneliness and penury would be preferable to the slightest insult from her son. She felt unsure—she even had an impulse to run away, and hide herself in the busy world outside.

Frederika looked down the corridor into the flat. She went inside, and he shut the door carefully behind her.

He led her to the sitting-room. Frederika flinched from the very idea of a scene. Her confusion found no words. Jonah was to her eye smooth and unassailable as a statue—he was strange to her.

'Sit down, mother,' said Jonah, host for the first time in his life.

'I see you've been out already,' said Frederika, noting his new jacket.

There was a silence. Frederika clasped her hands together. Jonah decided to lean against the mantelpiece.

'Mother!' Jonah blurted out at length. 'I know you must be furious with me! But what could I do—we're penniless!'

Frederika looked at him in surprise.

'Jonah—I'm your mother—I want what is best for you—if I had money, you know you could have anything you wanted. I've failed you. Don't make me hate myself.' Jonah looked away from her. He looked slowly round the room, at all the expensive objects. He wanted Frederika to follow his eye, and admire the taste and value of the objects. But she continued to look at him. 'I still want what's best for you. Jonah—it's all I care about. It means more than money to me. Tell me what's happening—I'm entitled to know.'

She shuddered, in spite of herself.

'I don't know how to tell you,' Jonah began. 'I wanted to impress you. Gray is rich, he has a beautiful flat'—Frederika did not flinch—'and I wanted to show you that I wasn't just a child any more—it's time I was in the world, doing something for myself.'

He stopped, blushed.

'I knew it, I knew it,' Frederika moaned softly. 'Don't say any more. You treat this change in your life so lightly. You don't know what kind of life you are taking up—such a sad life.'

'Don't blame yourself!' Frederika was surprised by the desperation in his voice. His face was open and vulnerable. 'This is just how it's happened—it's no one's fault. I can't help it. It's . . . it's . . . I don't know, it's life.'

Frederika got up and went to him. She held his hands for a moment, looking away from him. Then she crossed quickly

to the window. She waited, with her back to Jonah, till she was fully in command of her emotions.

'It's a lovely view,' she said. 'I love being high up and looking down on trees.' Then she turned. 'I'm so frightened for you, Jonah. When I heard your voice on the phone, it cut me through and through. It was like a knife in my heart. I didn't want to come here. When I saw you, I almost didn't come in. I wanted to turn and run. But Jonah. . . .'

'Yes, mother.'

'I am your mother. I always will be. Whatever happens. God bless you!'

'Gray wants me to stay here.'

Frederika took time to acknowledge this new idea. Her world was turning too fast. She looked out of the window again.

'I haven't anything to offer you myself. I can't forbid it. Oh Jonah—I can't even tell you I think it's wrong. I don't know any more. Maybe it will turn out for the best. But I don't think I'll ever get used to the idea of you . . . living like this.'

Jonah moved towards her.

'I want you to stay too. I told Gray. He says it's all right for you to stay.'

Frederika turned from the window again.

'You're still a baby,' she said. 'You still need your mother.'

Her face relaxed for a moment, the cares of the past weeks, and the past night, banished.

'It's not that,' Jonah insisted. 'I want to look after you. As you said yourself, you're still my mother.'

'I don't know what I want to do,' said Frederika. 'It's not something I can accept in a moment. Let me see the rest of the flat. I don't know if I can adapt to this life. It might not

work out. I might be in the way. Besides, what do you think I shall feel when I see you with an old man for a lover—see the two of you together every day of my life ?'

'Stay for a while anyway.'

'I expect I will. But do show me the rest of the flat.' Frederika put her hand lightly on her son's arm. She gazed up at him. 'Tell me truly, Jonah—do you think you can be happy? I'm so worried.' Jonah twisted away. Frederika sighed. She moved from him. 'We've been talking only about you, dear. But this situation isn't easy for me either. It's humiliating. Suddenly I'm not a woman any more,' she stopped for a moment, embarrassed. 'There are some things it's easier to say to anyone else but one's own son—but I feel I'm no longer a woman, I'm just the mother of a grown-up son—and that son has supplanted me. Many people would condemn the life I have led—well, let them!—but this, this situation . . . it's something I disapprove of myself. It seems unnatural. I'm frightened. I'm being turned into a bawd for my own son!'

'Don't torment me,' Jonah begged her. 'I'm not used to it myself yet: We'll get used to it. Please try.'

Frederika composed her face, and smiled at him. She pressed his hand, and went out of the room to look at the rest of the flat.

Gray rang at his own front-door and waited.

'I hope he's in,' he grumbled to himself.

He did not hear recognisable sounds, but sensed movement inside the flat.

After a day working, with a whole afternoon between himself and Jonah's actual presence, he felt stronger, more sure of his ability to cope with the boy.

He heard a definite sound now, of someone closing a door—then a step in the corridor, which almost certainly was not Jonah's. It came nearer, the front door opened, and there was Frederika in an overall. She had run into the bathroom to brush her hair when she heard the bell.

They looked at each other. Frederika stepped aside to let Gray pass. He looked down the corridor suspiciously.

'Hello,' said Frederika expressionlessly. 'Jonah asked me to come here to see him. He's resting. He's a bit tired.'

She was deeply resentful of this man, who had rejected her in favour of her son. And she was frightened of his power. He could throw her out of the flat. She didn't know what Jonah would do, if that happened.

'I feel guilty—in regard to you,' said Gray. 'Things—just happened. But I'm a grown man. I'm fully responsible. You must have been very worried about your son. I shouldn't have let him stay.'

'I'm worried still,' said Frederika, relieved, warming to his kindness. Through the long day, Gray, in her mind, had become a villain.

'Shall we go in to Jonah?'

Gray seemed more like a visitor in his own home—he allowed Frederika to lead the way inside.

'Hello, Jonah,' he said. Jonah was sitting in an armchair. Again Frederika noted the diffidence in Gray's voice. 'Did you have a pleasant afternoon?' Jonah looked from Gray to his mother. 'Your mother and I have met,' said Gray, trying to reassure him.

'I'll make some coffee, shall I?' said Frederika, judging it best not to be in their way.

'Thank you,' said Gray. 'Most kind of you.'

She stopped at the door. Gray put his hand on Jonah's

shoulder and smiled down at him—then he looked at Frederika, frankly, without malice, without defiance. Frederika continued on her way to the kitchen, closing the door behind her.

'How are you?' Gray asked Jonah, bending towards him.

Jonah fidgeted under his hand, irritated by his tone of concern.

'I'm all right,' he replied. 'Mother came this afternoon. I think she wants to stay. Do you mind?'

'Not,' said Gray, 'if it's going to make you happy.' Jonah shrugged his shoulders. 'Shall I go and talk to her?'

'If you like,' said Jonah.

Gray stood over Jonah, perplexed.

'You don't seem quite yourself,' he said. 'You must tell me. . . .'

Jonah made an effort to smile.

'It's nothing you've done, I promise you. You've been very kind. I'm tired. That's all. Mother's been used to being in command all her life. Do you think she'll get used to the change?'

'I'll go and talk to her.'

Gray hesitated, Jonah said nothing more, so he went to the kitchen.

She was at the sink when he came in, undismayed by greasy water. The kettle was on the gas. She didn't stop working when Gray came in.

'It's a lovely kitchen,' she said.

'Jonah is well, isn't he?' he asked, demanding reassurance.

'Of course he is. His mother should know.' Frederika stopped working, and dried her hands. 'I have the impression that you really care for Jonah.'

'But I do!' Gray insisted. 'What kind of man do you think

I am? Jonah isn't a street arab—he's . . . he's special . . . he's Jonah.'

'You understand my position,' said Frederika. 'It's—most delicate. He's still a child. He doesn't know anything at all.'

'I'm fully aware of that. He told me.'

'Yesterday, he was my baby. And today . . .'

'I know,' Gray repeated. 'I'll be good to him, I'll be gentle. And you'll be here.'

'You really want me here?'

'Jonah wants you here.'

'And that's enough?'

'I want his good,' said Gray deliberately. 'I want what's best for him. Is that such a remarkable thing in this world? Does that alone make me so unusual?'

'I'm sorry,' said Frederika. 'I do believe you. But remember, I don't know you, it's so difficult for me to know what to do, what to think.'

Gray was lost for words.

'I've found the coffee-grinder,' said Frederika, distracting him. 'It's electric, isn't it? I don't know where to plug it in.'

Gray took it from her. He plugged it in and watched the blades whir.

'Jonah is worried that you won't want to stay. You're used to things being so different. I want you to stay. I think we could make a life here.'

Frederika studied him. Gray was going to be an important figure in her future life.

'I won't pretend to you that I'm heartbroken to see the way Jonah is going. I wouldn't have chosen this way for him, and I don't approve of it. You know yourself what difficulties, what unhappiness, lie before him. But he's grown-up now. I can't fashion his life for him. I haven't even tried

to reason with him, or tried to persuade him to come away. Things are as they are, and I must bow to the inevitable, for the present cannot be effaced, however much any of us might wish it. I must bow, and I hope with grace and courage. This is what I have been thinking about the whole day. It seems to me that you're a good man. If there has to be a man in Jonah's life, I think he is fortunate in finding you. You're lonely, and I understand that. My own life could be very empty, one day.'

The kettle began to boil. Gray handed Frederika the coffee-pot.

'I have a cleaner twice a week,' he said absent-mindedly.

'And do you cook yourself?'

'Sometimes. When I have guests in the evening, she comes to cook for me.'

Frederika looked around her, holding the coffee-pot so that the aroma rose under her nostrils.

'It's a funny thing, Gray. But I've dreamed about a kitchen like this. It's so practical. There's everything here that you could think of.' She smiled shyly. 'You know, in a way this is the life I've craved. It's the life I should have had and somehow didn't.'

'That hardly seems likely,' said Gray, not unkindly.

'Perhaps it's a dream.'

Frederika put the coffee pot and cups on to a tray, and gave it to Gray to carry.

'Illusions become very precious—especially to people our age.'

Jonah, when they returned to him, was sitting as they had left him, staring vacantly ahead of him.

'Have you two come to an arrangement?' he asked bluntly.

'We'll see how things work out over the next few days,' said Frederika.

'You're staying then?'

'For the time being, at any rate,' said Frederika.

Jonah stirred.

'Let's get it straight, then. I'll be Gray's lover, and you'll be living here with us, as a sort of guest.'

Frederika pursed her lips.

'Why, yes, exactly, dear,' she said, without looking at either of the two men.

'It's enough that we've worked things out for the moment,' said Gray gently. 'We don't have to find labels for everything. That won't make things easier.'

'It's just that I don't like pretence,' said Jonah. 'Only the truth will do in future.'

'Young people are so odd today,' said Frederika, awkwardly. 'When you get to our age, you know that truth is no use to you. When young people insist on the truth, I always feel that someone is going to be hurt by it.'

And she passed round the coffee.

Gray kept Jonah supplied with money. Not having to ask his mother for money was almost the biggest charge in his life.

He remembered how his mother used to take out her purse and count the notes, and count the silver. She would lay the coins and notes in her palm, and gaze at this special combination as though printing it on her mind. Then she would empty them into his hands as though they were a precious liquid, a magic force which made her the greater by the giving, and him the greater by receiving. She forced money on him as though it were food. She would lean back and sigh happily, exhausted. It was another birth: she was

giving of her own flesh, of her energy, the very calcium from her bones: and she would look, after each giving, at a new child, as though she had that moment brought him forth from her womb, full-grown and lovely as he was. Jonah, his hand closing over the money she had given him, was the visible perfection she had dreamed, and in dreaming had created. He was her flesh made flesh, he was her dreams made flesh.

Now it was Gray who gave Jonah a loose handful of money. As he pocketed it, the two men stood together, and Frederika was elsewhere in the room trying to find something to occupy her. Gray gave Frederika cheques which she took to the bank.

With money in his pocket, Jonah spent an afternoon strolling. He took a look at the world. The time was past when he had been Frederika's son alone, with no place out of her sight. Now, he could choose what air he breathed. He wanted to possess the world—the trees which rose green and vital in the quiet crescents of London, and the roaring traffic which crowded the main streets, and the shop-windows which called for attention to the people crushed on the pavements. It was a new world to Jonah, and he imagined himself a part of it.

Frederika went to the bank. The cold marble hall, where voices whispered as in a mausoleum, delivered up her money, and she went straight to Beauchamp Place to look at Gray's shop.

'It's lovely,' she said, walking up the two steps into the shop and hardly taking time to look around her. 'Of course, I was expecting something elegant and tasteful!' She peered into the window. 'I love that Lacquer Cabinet!'

Gray was glad that at least the Regency Wine Table, which

if anything he had disliked more than the William and Mary Cabinet, had been sold.

'It's very nice to see you,' he said.

'I hope you're not busy,' said Frederika, after a moment's hesitation. 'But I've been so looking forward to seeing your shop. I should have phoned first, before I came.'

'Not necessary,' said Gray.

Gray preferred, on the whole, to keep his business life apart from his private life.

Frederika continued to behave as though unaware of any slight coldness in his manner. She walked in and out among the objects, pressing her handbag against her dress to make herself as small as possible. She didn't want to knock anything over. Against the dark wooden objects, she was fragile and dainty. She touched the orange velvet chair in the window.

'I like that,' she said.

'I'm glad.'

'I can see the notice on it—but you know, I'd love to try it just for a second.' She made a movement as though to remove the 'Please do not sit' notice from it—but not wanting to risk irritating Gray, she thought better of it, and restrained herself.

Gray tried to be more hospitable.

'Try it, of course, if you want to,' he said.

'No,' said Frederika decisively. 'It's not right, coming in here and disturbing you, as if I own the place. Truly, I was only passing, and I just had to look in on you.'

It was Gray's turn to fear that he might have given offence.

'Look, I'm awfully sorry—I'm very glad you called, really. But just this morning I'm terribly busy. You've caught me at a bad time, I'm afraid. I only wish I could have offered to

take you out to coffee. But I've some urgent orders to see to.'

'I understand,' said Frederika. She touched the velvet chair again. 'I do love it,' she said. 'You know, it would be so nice if we could have it at home—or is it too much to ask?'

'We'll see,' said Gray, smiling now.

Frederika stepped out of the shop, and Gray touched the chair himself. He looked round his shop, after Frederika had gone, and resumed his work happily.

Frederika walked along Beauchamp Place, looking at the dress-shops.

There was nothing she wanted in the shops, yet she owned everything she saw. Not a thing was beyond her reach, there was not a leather coat, not a linen dress she could not have walked in and taken. And she didn't want a thing.

She made her way to Harrods. Today she was content. Her balance was restored, and her new life seemed to have found its own rhythm. In Harrods, she was comforted by the profusion of goods everywhere. They were so costly, so inessential. Harrods could be the inner sanctum of her life, she decided. It was a Temple raised to women, and here she could be herself. She did not have to use the arts which had been her study throughout her life—she did not have to assail the world as a provocative, subtle, feminine creature. In Harrods, a woman could be herself, as she walked about, equipping herself with everything needful for a life among men.

'It doesn't seem right,' she thought as she walked along. 'Half the world starving. Yes,' she thought smugly, 'It must be quite half. I'm not going to buy a thing today.'

It was cool at the bar. The counter was smooth, vegetables were on show under glass, and the barmaids were fresh in their white uniforms. Women were perched on high stools,

and they drew their furs possessively about their hips, drinking the anaemic juice by which these same hips were to be made more personable.

'Starchless bread too,' thought Frederika. 'What could be more useless than that! I must have some!'

She got on a stool herself, and looked at the furs.

'What a wonderful world!' she thought. 'It's a summer day—anyone can wear mink when it's cold!'

She drank carrot juice. Nothing could be more slimming than carrot juice, unless it was not to drink anything at all.

The women around her were ageing, many of them. They worshipped their bodies with high seriousness, set them off with furs and dazzling hair. Their lips clutched at their glasses, but Frederika could see that they were seeking, not pleasure, but the assurance of their own value. Not for them the necessities of life—they were worth whatever they could acquire that was over and above the necessary. How rich they were!

'And they consider themselves respectable married women! All they care about is themselves! With me it's different, of course. I've not had a husband to care for, and a real home. It simply was not to be. Even now I haven't a real home.'

Frederika sighed, and treated herself to a second carrot juice.

Frederika had bought herself a frilly apron. She did not feel dressed in the kitchen without it.

'It's the really modern room in the flat,' she told Gray. 'I like all the rooms—but in a sense the kitchen is the room I like best.'

She had to have a spotless kitchen to work in. She cleared every surface, the draining-boards, the formica table, even the top of the refrigerator. While there was a single dirty cup and saucer, she would not so much as put a saucepan on the gas.

Then she made a display of all the things which contributed to a meal. She would get out the utensils, and lay them side by side, kitchen-knife, grater, colander. She made a separate arrangement of salt and peppers, of herbs, of oil and vinegar for salad dressing. She would find a space somewhere else for the meat and vegetables, for the cheeses and fruit.

'I know I'm ridiculous,' she said to Gray. 'But it's explained by my background. Once upon a time we were poor. The only luxury, oddly enough, was that we owned a grand piano. And nobody played it. We had such funny ideas then about how the rich lived. I expect all that explains a lot about me.'

'Yes,' said Gray.

Frederika tripped about the kitchen, talking aloud to herself. She tapped the tips of her fingers together impatiently, trying to remember all the little things a cook could easily forget.

She thought she was alone: but Jonah was lounging in the doorway.

'Oh, there you are, dear,' she said. 'I didn't hear you. Where have you been all day?' She didn't give him a chance to reply. She turned her back on him and began running water in the sink. Then she turned again and looked thoughtfully, not at Jonah, but at the food. 'I've got lots to do, I don't know where I am. You mustn't get in my way.'

Jonah stepped into the kitchen and cut himself a slice of cheese.

'Jonah,' she cried. 'Do leave that.'

He chewed slowly, and picked up an apple.

'Jonah—you're like a locust. You'll eat up everything. Do leave that alone!' She rapped his hand as he picked up an orange and idly rolled it into the pile of fruit. 'You are a nuisance!'

He took a great bite at the apple, and picked up the orange again. Then he sauntered away.

Gray, when he came home, found Frederika still in the kitchen, prowling anxiously about; Jonah was in the sitting-room reading a comic, an apple core and orange peel on the carpet at his feet.

'Hello,' said Gray. 'How are you?'

'All right,' said Jonah.

Gray bent to pick up the mess. Jonah moved his feet.

'Sorry,' he said.

Gray smiled tolerantly.

'Youth, youth,' he murmured.

He put the core and the peel in an ashtray but thought better of it, and took them out to the kitchen instead.

'Anything the matter with Jonah?' he asked Frederika.

Frederika was preoccupied.

'Not that I know.'

'He's a lazy boy,' said Gray indulgently.

Frederika was in no mood to talk, so he left her and went back to the sitting-room. Jonah had curled himself up on the sofa, his cheek pressed on his hand—he was looking ahead of him vacantly. Now the comic was on the floor beside the sofa.

Gray sat near Jonah and talked to him about his day at the shop. He didn't know whether Jonah had heard any of it. But he enjoyed the calm, he and Jonah alone in his sitting-

room, with only his own voice to fill the distance between them.

Then he went to sit next to Jonah on the sofa. He put a hand on the boy's shoulder. Jonah squirmed slightly, and he removed it.

'What are you thinking about?' Gray asked.

'Nothing,' said Jonah.

'You must be thinking about something.'

Jonah looked up at him.

'I'm just lying here,' he said. 'That's all I'm doing.'

When Frederika called them to eat, they sat at table dutifully, and Frederika watched their every mouthful.

'Take your elbows off the table,' she told Jonah. 'You don't want any more? What's the matter, don't you like it? There are people in Europe who would give their right arm for a meal like this.'

Gray interceded for him. 'He's doing very well, don't worry—it's delicious.'

'I don't know,' said Frederika. 'I've been slaving over a hot stove all day long and for what!'

'I'm sorry,' said Jonah.

And he bent over his plate again.

'That's the appreciation I get,' said Frederika.

Gray murmured something sympathetic.

After the meal, Frederika cleared and Gray went with Jonah back to the sitting-room.

'Let me put a record on,' he said.

He picked a record out of the cabinet. He found that Jonah was staring at him.

'What have you got?' Jonah asked.

'I was thinking of playing Mozart,' said Gray.

Jonah said nothing. He wandered to the window.

'I suppose I'm no real company for you,' said Gray softly. He started the record, and listened to it for a moment. 'You're young. Your mother and I . . .'

'Play whatever you like,' said Jonah.

He went to the sofa and sat down.

'There you are then,' said Frederika, bustling in with the newspapers under her arm. She plumped herself down in an armchair. 'I've kept the Sundays,' she said. 'I never seem to have the time to finish them.' She waited for an answer.

'Oh,' she said solemnly. 'You're listening to the record.' She listened herself for a moment. 'Beautiful, isn't it? What is it, Gray?'

She folded the papers noisily, and settled back to read. Every now and then she looked up to see what the two men were doing. They hardly moved. Jonah picked up a comic, but he threw it away at once. Another time he went to look out of the window again.

'You're so restless, Jonah,' she said.

He went back to the sofa at once.

Then Gray had to turn the record over.

'What's this piece called?' Frederika asked. 'Oh, it's the same thing again.'

Soon, she found their silence, broken only by Mozart, oppressive.

'I've been following this serial,' she said. 'I expect it's very silly really. It seems to me that all you need today is to have three divorces and then you write your life story for the papers.'

'You don't know how you give yourself away,' Jonah muttered.

'What's that?' Frederika asked.

'Oh, it doesn't matter.'

Frederika raised her eyebrows.

But Gray was watching Jonah carefully, with deep concern.

'Jonah,' he said gently. 'Shall we go out somewhere?' Jonah gazed at him blankly. 'I was even thinking, perhaps we ought to go away for a few days—I could arrange it—just the two of us.'

'I don't want that—how would that help!' Jonah exclaimed. 'I don't know what I want.'

He left the room abruptly.

Gray was about to follow him: a slight movement from Frederika checked him.

'He's highly strung,' she said. 'He takes after me. Just let him be. He'll come round.'

Gray turned.

'That may be. But he's unhappy, don't you see it?'

There was a moment of tension between them. Frederika blinked slowly.

'I'm his mother,' she said quietly. 'Naturally I'm concerned about him. But tell me what more can be done for him. The whole flat revolves round him. Both of us, grown people, think only of him.' Frederika settled back in her chair comfortably. 'Everybody is unhappy in some way. We just go ahead and make the best of it. He should think of us too sometimes. I remember how worried I was about him—when we first came here. Believe me, he's not half so concerned for either of us as we are about him. I don't want to complain—I suppose it's only natural.'

'I'm sure we should do something,' Gray persisted. 'I'll talk to him.'

'I know my son. I've nursed him through all his childish illnesses. He's moody, but he recovers soon enough. You mustn't spoil him.'

'There are several things I wanted to ask you,' said Gray uneasily. 'You'll probably be offended. But I want to know why Jonah at his age is still reading comics.'

Frederika replied calmly.

'Why shouldn't he? He's never wanted to read anything else. I don't know why you think I should be offended by your asking me that. I assure you I don't feel guilty. Whatever else I may have been, I've not been a bad mother to him.'

Gray went to the gramophone and switched it off. Then he turned to face her in the silent room.

'I don't think it's right,' he said. 'A boy of eighteen should know a great deal more than Jonah knows. He shouldn't read comics. It's fantastic! At his age I had already read much of the world's great literature.'

'Very nice—it's a pity Jonah doesn't care for these things. I can't make him read. Nothing would please me more.'

Gray shook his head.

'He seems to have missed so much. I daresay you did the best you could for him—but with perhaps the best will in the world, you weren't able to give him a father or a proper home.'

'I did my best to make up for a home and a father,' sighed Frederika. 'My conscience is clear. And tell me—this is a serious question—what good did it do you, reading the world's great literature?'

'It taught me a little of life. Life can be painful, and reading took the edge off for me. Afterwards, I found that nothing in my life came altogether as a surprise. I was prepared.'

'You were prepared—was that such an advantage?'

'It was something to fill my mind,' said Gray, exasperated.

'It's no good having an empty mind. I've found great literature a consolation.'

'I don't want to quarrel with you.' Frederika spoke in a neutral voice. 'But I think you're only complaining because you think you would have found it easier to keep Jonah entertained if he had more resources. I could have told you all along, boredom is his besetting affliction. Ever since he was a child, he's been following me around, asking endlessly what he should do to occupy himself. He can be a terrible nuisance.'

'But how can he reach the age of eighteen and know nothing? Everything is new to him!'

'True. He comes here to a new life, and for the first five minutes he's excited, and then he becomes just the same as he was before, eternally bored. Nothing holds his interest. It's no use blaming me for it. You try and change him if you want to—I shall be only too happy if you succeed.'

'He's empty,' said Gray, wringing his hands.

'In a way, empty.' Frederika rose to her feet. 'Except for one thing. I rather think he resents me. He wants to blame me for what he is—just as you are doing now. He wants me with him all the time, he can't do without me—you've seen that. And he resents me. I've never said this before. I sometimes have the feeling he hates me. Believe me, I wish he were happy. He'd behave better with you if he were, and better with me.'

'There must be something I can do.'

'I daresay I surprise you, saying these things. I'm not a clever woman, not really—but there are some things I know. In a way, perhaps I resent Jonah myself. I'm so used to him. I can't imagine life without him. And yet, that morning when he phoned me, after having stayed away the

whole night, I thought then I'd lost him. Perhaps it would have been better, who knows? But it happened differently.'

'You have your troubles,' said Gray. 'But I must think first of Jonah. He shouldn't be so bound up in you. I don't say you shouldn't live here. But he must have his own life. He is empty.'

'In a way.'

'I must do something.'

Frederika shrugged her shoulders, and walked about the room.

'You can't change things just because you want them different,' she said. 'We are what we are, I warn you. If you succeed in changing him, which I doubt, he may not want me any more, and he also may not want you. And what can you do? If you'll take my advice, you'll get him comics to read, not the classics. You'll get him a television set. Take him to the pictures sometimes. Only rubbish, of course. He'll hate you if you drag him off to foreign films.'

'This is terrible,' said Gray, beating his head with his clenched fist.

Frederika in her turn was exasperated.

'Maybe it is terrible, maybe it isn't. It's life. It's how things are. You've tired me out. Both of you. I'm tired out between the one and the other. You both want to be happy. Jonah's a child and you're a child too, if you must know. I'm going to bed. Say what you like to Jonah—I promise you it won't do any good!'

Jonah went from the sitting-room to the bedroom he shared with Gray. He was drawn straight to the window. Behind him were the imposing figures of Gray and his mother—

before him was the vast sky of London, glowing, soon to darken as night began to fall.

Under the sky lay London, with its millions of souls. He was a stranger to every one. He thought of the streets, and the houses, the families and the couples. He moved about alone in his own orbit. All, all were strangers to him.

In the crescent below, a couple were walking side by side. They crossed the road and stopped in front of the house. Standing close together, they talked. Jonah could not see their faces, but he could tell from their gestures, from the poses of their bodies, that they were talking animatedly, and he envied them their strength of feeling. He was so listless himself. When feeling came, it overpowered him. He was at the mercy of it—he could only behave like a petulant child, snapping back with futile anger. Any feeling exhausted him. His body seemed already laid waste by emotions which he had not even been able to express. Sometimes, nothing moved him, and he thought he was already dead—he was carrying about on his two feet a corpse. At other times, his body seemed to explode into life, and the violence of his feeling frightened him. His mother could be so infuriating. He wanted to kill her sometimes.

The couple kissed, for a long time. Then the girl pushed the man away, and ran under the portico below the window, out of his sight. The man followed her. Jonah saw nothing, heard nothing. He waited, and the man reappeared. Jonah heard the door of the house slam, and the man crossed the road and walked away from the house, keeping close to the railings, and out of sight. Jonah envied him. He was part of the city.

The night sky was mellow, and enticing. It made Jonah

ache to see it, and to think of all the life in the city, from which he was totally cut off.

Jonah thought of the girl living unknown to him somewhere in the house. He didn't know what she looked like, but he was sure that he would know her if he ever saw her. He thought of her with fear. He longed to meet anyone at all, anyone besides Gray and his mother.

He heard a movement in the room behind him. The door had opened, and Gray stood inside the room with his hand on the light-switch.

'Don't turn the light on,' said Jonah.

'I was just going to,' said Gray. 'Then I saw you in the window. You looked so sad. It wrung my heart. I wish I could help you. I wish there was something I could do for you.'

Jonah noted the sympathy, the feeling in Gray's voice. It did not touch him at all. He envied Gray because he was capable of this feeling.

'I know you mean well,' said Jonah.

His voice sounded hollow, it seemed to echo in the room. Gray took a step or two further into the room, but he did not come too close.

'If you could tell me what you want,' he said.

'I can't,' said Jonah. Gray sat down the bed. 'I don't know what people look for in life. I don't understand what they do. I watch them in the streets and I think, where have they come from, where are they going, and I'm not even sure that I exist myself. Nothing is real. I don't want anything. I don't know what there is to want.'

'What can I tell you?' said Gray helplessly.

'What's the use of talking.' Jonah felt a momentary irritation with the bowed head—he wanted to smash it and see

the blood pour out. 'I know what I'm here for—what difference does it make to you whether I'm happy or not? That's not in the contract.'

'I care about you,' said Gray. 'Can't you understand that?'

'Not really,' said Jonah.

He moved away from the window. Gray got up, and they stood facing each other in the failing light.

'Oh Jonah,' sighed Gray.

His tone irritated Jonah.

'It's all your fault,' he flared up, 'Why did you have to have mother here? I didn't want her—I never want to see her again.'

'I wasn't the one who wanted her here,' Gray protested.

'I certainly didn't!'

'It's no use talking—I just don't know what to say.'

'Well, you seem to get on so well with her—it makes me sick to see it!'

Jonah wanted to hit Gray, to hurt him. He felt like a drowning man. 'Go on, admit it. I've seen you talking together. I'm your prisoner!'

'Jonah,' Gray pleaded with him. 'I can't bear to see you like this. Go, go if you must. I'm not stopping you. But I can't go on living with you like this!'

Jonah walked to the wall and leaned on it.

'I don't know what's happening,' he mumbled. 'It's all so . . . it's slipping away.'

He felt his strength being sucked into the wall. Gray moved towards him, put out a hand to him, still could not bring himself to touch him. Without looking up, Jonah felt his nearness.

'Let's be done with it,' he said, beginning to take his clothes off.

'This is what you want, isn't it?' he panted. 'Right, let's get it over with. Don't want any of this rubbish any more. Let's be honest. No one cares for anyone.'

'That's not true,' said Gray. Jonah paused for a moment, arrested by his voice. But he turned his face away and went on undressing. 'I care for you,' he said slowly. 'I want you, not just your body. I'm not going to touch you. I'll sleep in the same bed with you, live under the same roof. We'll see each other every day, at the beginning of the day and the end of the day, but I won't touch you. Not unless you want it too. I'm not a monster, you see. I can't bear the way you are, and I want to help you. Does that say anything to you?'

Jonah got into bed slowly, and pulled the blankets up to his chin.

'I'm so tired,' he said. 'I hear you, but you're so far away. A million miles. Farther than the farthest star. What are you saying? How can I understand anything?'

PART TWO

Jonah took up more than his share of the bed, and managed to pull most of the blankets over to his side. When Gray woke in the night, he did not push Jonah back into his own half, or wrestle gently with him till he had enough blanket to cover himself properly. He lay uncomfortably in the space left to him and listened to Jonah's breathing: he turned his head and made out as best he could in the dark the outline of the sleeping boy. Jonah in sleep seemed more passionate than in life.

When morning came, Gray got out of bed, taking care not to disturb Jonah, who at once stretched himself, and took over the whole bed.

Jonah was not asleep. His eyes were blinking under their closed lids, but he pressed them shut against the light and the living world.

Gray went out of the room, closing the door behind him silently; he went to the bathroom to wash and shave. Before washing, he brushed his hair in front of the mirror, looking at his face. Every stroke of the brush seemed to draw his hair away from his forehead, leaving his face more and more bare. With its distinguished lines, with its air of private suffering which at every moment seemed to speak to him from the mirror more clearly, his was a face which he liked to look at.

After washing, Gray went back to the mirror to shave. He tilted his head and tried to see himself as for the first time. Sometimes, it was Jonah's eyes that looked out at him, sometimes it was Jonah's face. Gray ached with Jonah, he *felt* Jonah inside him. He pressed his hand on his chest, his breast swelled with the pain of Jonah. He saw with his own knowing eyes, and Jonah's sad eyes, and he longed to free the tormented spirit in his breast. He yearned over his own youth. He was separated by so many years, so much suffering, from the young man he had been once. The image of himself when young was there to haunt him in an old face.

He splashed after-shave lotion on his face—it stung his skin, returning him to the present. He rubbed hair oil into his palm, pressed it on his scalp. He went back to his bedroom, and dressed quietly, ignoring Jonah. Frederika was in the kitchen waiting to give him breakfast.

'I hope you slept well,' she said.

'Yes, thank you,' he replied automatically, avoiding her eye.

He sat at the kitchen table, his back turned slightly towards her, while she busied herself at the stove. Her voice was quite fresh, as though last night had not happened at all. She put food in front of him.

'I hope it's not overcooked,' she said.

'Just how I like it.' He spoke before testing it.

Frederika sat down opposite to watch him eat. She didn't eat anything herself. As usual, she waited to eat till after Gray had left the flat.

They had sat like this the day before, and would do so again in days to come. Gray tried to relax. He would have liked to persuade himself that nothing was changed, that he

had not had to talk alone with Frederika. He stole a glance at her, almost expecting her to look different.

'I'm sorry I was so snappish last night,' she said. He immediately dropped his eyes to his plate. 'It's better to discuss things openly. I can see you'd rather not—but we can't go on as if nothing happened. That wouldn't work.'

'I was upset,' said Gray simply. 'I thought we were getting along so well together. Suddenly I find we don't agree at all.'

'We do get on well,' said Frederika warmly. 'Don't persuade yourself that we don't—just because of this one thing on which we can't agree.'

'The point of difference, remember, is Jonah.'

'I don't know why I exaggerate everything so much. I expect you touched a cord in me. Somewhere, deep down, I expect I feel guilty about him. But what I said I hold to—I wasn't just speaking on impulse. I hope you don't think it was pique—I'm not jealous of my son, I hope you don't think that—even though, until now, I was always first in everything wherever I lived, and now Jonah is first.'

'No,' said Gray wonderingly. 'That never occurred to me.'

'Then I'm sorry I ever mentioned it.'

'I hadn't really worked out what I think,' said Gray. 'Perhaps you're not to blame. I'll accept that you've done what you could—given your position.'

'That's what I wanted to hear,' Frederika breathed, as though she were completely satisfied. 'I knew you would have gone on feeling resentful if we hadn't talked.'

'But my position is quite different from yours.'

'You mean you think you can do more than I can?' said Frederika quickly. Gray did not reply. Frederika looked as though there was much she could have added—but she restrained herself. 'It's enough that you see my position—that's

all I wanted. Let me just add this'—she spoke as though she expected Gray to interrupt her, but in fact Gray was sitting quietly, staring at the food before him getting cold. 'I must tell you also that I now feel I'm here not just as Jonah's mother. I like looking after you too. I so love having someone to care for. I hinted as much to you that first day—and I know you didn't believe me then.'

'I do believe you,' said Gray, clearly thinking about something else.

She folded her hands on the table. In her quilted house-coat, she was a perfect domestic picture. Gray would have loved to believe in her completely, and banish the doubts about her which had invaded his mind.

'If there's any difference between us, it's all on account of Jonah. I know the situation here is not an easy one—even if we're all three of us determined to make an effort to behave sensibly. And Jonah's young, we mustn't forget that. We must make allowances.' Gray became confused as she talked—it was as though one whom he was beginning to regard as an enemy was being transformed into an accomplice. She continued. 'We get on well together. But young people can be cruel, they can be heartless, and the funny thing is, they don't mean it, they just don't understand.'

Gray nodded his head slowly, thinking of Jonah in sleep. He tried to steel himself, for he almost longed to be comforted by Frederika, and to complain of Jonah.

'Yes,' he said at length. 'It's nice to have someone here in the mornings—someone to sit with and have breakfast. It's not nice leaving an empty flat, especially in winter.'

Frederika made a movement. Gray imagined she was going to reach out a hand to touch his. He withdrew quickly. He felt that he had been on the verge of betraying Jonah.

'If only,' she said, 'I could persuade you that I'm really your friend. You can talk to me.'

Gray was thinking of his need for comfort. He had never before been so conscious of being lonely.

He rose to his feet, pushing back his chair.

'Yes,' he heard himself say. 'We are all human. We must forgive each other, and help each other.'

And to his surprise he was moved, he could detect real sympathy in his voice. It was he who was comforting Frederika. It was hardly what he had expected, but he felt better for it. The day was starting well. The future could be serene and comfortable. It made him feel stronger. Hating Frederika would only be a weakness.

'The churches are always telling us that we should help each other.' He smiled. 'I'm sure we still have something to give each other—all of us here.'

When he left the house, he felt too big for a taxi. He wanted real air to swell his lungs, for a while he wanted to grow to the size of his new feelings.

He thought of his shop, and reality was there again to cut him down. He was walking, not to draw air into his lungs and grow greater, but towards the shop from which he drew his living. He looked at his watch. It was getting late. He turned a corner into the main road, and hailed a taxi.

When he arrived at Beauchamp Place, his assistant was again waiting outside the shop.

'Why does he wear a pin-stripe suit in this weather?' Gray thought as he went up the two stairs and unlocked the door. 'Doesn't he see what's going on in the world about him? Things are changing. You don't have to be so formal nowadays. At his age he should wear a suede jacket. He'd look quite nice in it.'

Gray switched on the lights, and glanced quickly round the shop. Everything was in its place, as he had left it the night before. It was a picture he had been carrying in his head since then—but he did not linger this morning to enjoy it. He was already somebody when he arrived at the shop.

For his mind had not left Jonah, sprawled on the bed in his flat. He toyed with schemes for improving him. For a start he decided to buy him books. He imagined piles of new books tied with string, and recalled the smell of bookshops.

'It can't do any harm,' he thought. 'Books will be more useful to him than new clothes.'

Today, it was easy for him to leave the shop: it would not suffer if he were away from it for an hour or so. He chose a bookshop nearby in the main Brompton Road, one where he was known, where he was thoroughly comfortable. When he stepped into the bookshop, he was at once in another world. God invented the womb, but with the bookshop man went one better. Gray didn't examine the shelves with his eye—he stood still for a moment and let all his senses together take in an impression of them. He drank the atmosphere with his pores. He felt smug—the shop and the books, neither of his creating, were his gift to Jonah. He remembered himself as a young man. From the very beginning, as early as he could remember, the very smell of books had been intoxicating to him. He used to feel passionately about the great dead. They were not dead to him. They were his best friends, better than his best friends, for they were stable, and he would not, as the years passed, find them changed.

Of course, there was a great difference between Gray in his youth and Jonah. Gray walked about the shop and won-

dered which of the thousands of volumes would appeal to the ignorant boy.

From the poetry section he chose Shakespeare's sonnets.
"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?" he mused.

Impossible to imagine that there was a boy in the world who did not know the poem. It was in Gray's bones, his bones sang with the music of it. He couldn't imagine that Shakespeare all those years ago was the first to think it up. 't was from the marrow of Gray's bones. He rejoiced to think of there being a boy to whom the lines were new. It was his happy role to know that boy, and to introduce him to the great lines. The poem was his own marrow.

It was written for Jonah. It was for all the lovely boys down the centuries, but above all for Jonah. It was for all time, but now especially for him.

There on another shelf was *The Idiot* by Dostoievsky.

'I'm a wonderful, wonderful person,' thought Gray, as he took it off the shelf, weighed it in his hand, opened it gently, and felt the glue of the spine crack. He slipped off the dust cover to look at the binding and the lettering.

'The Idiot who was a saint,' thought Gray. 'Prince Myshkin. . . .'

The prince was also in his bones. The prince who saw with his soul. Gray's soul sang as he thought of the enchanted days when he first read the story of the idiot prince. Gray too saw with his soul. He saw great good in Jonah, in spite of all his faults. Jonah was another sufferer. Gray was a sufferer too. Jonah had a soul, it needed only to be breathed into life. Gray would bring it to life with his breath, and with Dostoievsky's breath.

Gray thought of Jonah and his comics, and pulled down a few volumes of Henty and Ballantyne and Buchan. He

looked over the titles with an amused smile. The new titles sat very ill with Shakespeare and Dostoievsky.

When he got back to the shop, carrying the books, he told his assistant to arrange for the hire of a television set. He arranged to have the orange chair sent to his flat. The rest of the day's business, by contrast, seemed unusually trivial.

After Gray left, Frederika waited for Jonah to get up. She would not go out without giving both the men breakfast. She decided this morning not to knock on Jonah's door to hurry him.

When at last he came to the kitchen, Jonah was wearing Gray's silk dressing-gown. Frederika saw that he had not shaved. The hair on his chin was beginning to get thicker, and was darker than she had expected it to be. His face was pale, his eyes puffy.

'You've not washed?' she said.

She spoke without reproach, more as a matter of routine.

'I do wish,' she said next, 'that you'd try to get up at the same time as Gray. This makes double work for me.'

'All right,' said Jonah.

He did not look up when she put a plate of food in front of him.

'I hope you're feeling better this morning,' she said. Jonah tensed slightly, nerved for a scene. But Frederika said no more than, 'You were awfully grumpy last night—that's hardly the way to get the best out of life.'

Jonah hesitated, then began to eat. She stood over him.

'Are you going out?' she asked casually.

'I don't know.'

'Because I'm going out myself, and I have to leave a note'

for the char. If you're not going out, I don't want you getting in her way. She must do her work.'

She spoke as if this morning was in no way different from any other.

'I don't know what I'm going to do,' said Jonah. He lifted his head.

Frederika met his eye, slightly questioning, and Jonah said no more. She waited till he had finished eating before she went out.

'I've done my duty,' she thought. A breakfast for two men and a note for the char was all her duty. 'Our life with Gray could be a good life. But one needs a capacity for enjoying it.'

She had the full day to devote to herself. It was like a reward for she knew not what. She took a taxi to Knightsbridge, in the wake of Gray, but did not go as far as Beau-champ Place. Harrods was her goal.

Her pulse quickened, and she waited eagerly for the taxi to stop, and the commissionaire to hand her out into the street.

'I'm so little,' she thought, in the shadow of the vast building. 'I'm the quintessence of woman.'

She walked through the halls. Her eye, amused, skimmed the counters, seeking out faults. She did not let it be seen in her face, but inwardly she grumbled. She felt that today nothing was going to be good enough for her—she did not have to look closely at the goods on display to know that.

For today was a special day. Her new life had become stable. She had clearly formulated an attitude: she had settled into her role of loving mother, of loving wife almost, and ruled from the kitchen. She laughed lightly to herself, wondering what people would make of her who had known her in her past life. She had to admit to herself that truly,

she was now fifty-three, and not averse to having an easier life.

There was something so wearisome in the constant effort to be pleasing men. There had been times when she wondered if it was all worthwhile. Now there was only Jonah to please, and Gray—and in a sense neither was a man, not a man to her at any rate. She still had power, and was clever enough to enjoy it. It was power, moreover, of a more subtle kind.

She picked her way daintily along the corridors. It seemed to her that there was no room for anyone else. But she was aware of people about her. She knew she was not a world in herself. At any moment, she was liable to have an encounter which might disturb her, or, equally, might enlarge her day.

She heard her name called, and started. It was a voice from the past. Before her was the old lady from the opera. Frederika found in the meeting, which evoked memories, cause for self-congratulation. She was able to marvel anew at her own capacity for survival, as times changed, and at her own readiness to adapt.

The old lady held out her hands—Frederika took them in both hers, looking at her through her eye-length veil. She laid her cheek on the leathery cheek which offered itself. She had never liked this woman.

'Henrietta!' she exclaimed in delighted tones. 'You look simply ravishing!'

Frederika examined her carefully. The hair hardly belonged to the face. It sat on top of the face like a helmet. And she wore violet. Violet was not a colour any more.

'I haven't seen you since . . . oh, it was a whole age ago,' Frederika said. 'At the opera, wasn't it, a whole age ago.'

'You look well,' said Henrietta accusingly.

Frederika watched the wrinkles move in the poor old face. There were more wrinkles than she had rememberd. They moved amazingly.

'She's a witch,' thought Frederika. 'When I last saw her, I was in trouble. It was her fault, I'm sure of it. I truly believe that if she could have done something very wicked, something to cause me great pain and grief, she would have done it. This woman is unlucky to me. I've always known it. I'm sorry we've met today—I hope it doesn't mean something dreadful will happen. It's not surprising I never trusted Henrietta.'

Frederika went on watching her.

'We must have coffee together,' said Henrietta. She too was watching Frederika. 'We must talk. You must have so much to talk about.'

'What a lovely idea. I'd simply adore that! But it's such a pity, I have to rush away. There are a thousand and one things I have to do.'

Henrietta protested that she too was caught up in urgent affairs. She too had a world which revolved.

Regretfully, mewing like cats, the two women drew apart, and continued separately on their way.

The second encounter was entirely different. It was from the past, but from a happier past, and Frederika was sure that it boded well. It was, what is more, a man.

Leo was coming towards her fast, and he swung his body this way and that to avoid bumping into anyone. His body was fatter, and his face was not familiar, with cropped hair and a short beard—but it was his gait, it was his atmosphere, it was Leo unmistakably. She planted herself in his path. He stepped aside to pass her, and she stepped in the same direction. They bumped into each other, and he put a hand out,

cautiously, to help steady her. She was careful not to stiffen her body. He looked at her not without interest.

'Who is it then?' she asked mockingly.

He was the very picture of ignorance.

'I don't suppose,' she said, 'that you have the least idea who I am.'

Leo coughed apologetically. Frederika put her hands to the edge of her veil. Leo, to oblige her, looked curious.

'I'm Frederika!' cried Frederika.

Leo peered at her, and she cast back the four inches of veil.

'You don't remember me,' she said. 'And once we were so much in love—why, we meant everything to each other, for a while.' She laughed, with music in her voice. 'I'm more serious now, of course. I believe that you are too, Leo.'

He lowered his head in silent agreement, mustered his forces, and took both her hands. He spoke for the first time.

'It's marvellous to see you!' he exclaimed. 'I've often wondered about you, and from time to time I heard news. I was hoping that we'd meet again one day.'

'Those days; those months we spent together!' Frederika decided to ignore the evident fact that he was far less enthusiastic about the encounter than she was. 'Oh Leo,' she continued, not yet in full spate, 'I too, I have thought of you from time to time.'

'You've not really changed, Frederika. You're still as lovely as ever.'

'How brave!' cried Frederika, delighted. 'You're not frightened to tell the most outrageous lies!'

'No, really,' Leo attempted.

He stood before her, arms limp at his sides. He was her prisoner.

'You've put on weight,' she said, appraising him. She put

a hand on his sleeve. 'It suits you—you're not fat at all. You're sleek and beautiful!'

Next moment, her arm in his, they were going together between the counters.

'What are you doing here?' Frederika asked.

'I work here—I manage the hat department.'

'No,' Frederika gasped. 'How marvellous. Do you like it?'

'It's all right,' Leo replied coolly.

'I'm glad you've got on. I always knew you were talented. Now let's have coffee together. I want to hear all about it!'

She drew Leo along with her. In the restaurant, he pulled out a chair for her. Then he lowered himself opposite her, leaning towards her with the most endearing deference. She felt the warm comforting flow of his attention. Or did he perhaps lean towards her because he was negotiating his bulk, balancing the extra weight as he lowered himself into the chair?

'Yes,' he said. 'I can't really grumble. Things have turned out quite well for me, all things considered. I've been thinking of giving up this job, as a matter of fact. The last few years I've been investing in stocks and shares, and I seem to have a gift for it. But I get decent money here, and a bonus at the end of the year, and it all comes in handy.'

'I'm delighted to hear it! I must come to you for advice—I find stocks and shares and all that utterly fascinating.'

'Are you happy?' Leo asked her, when he had ordered coffee.

'Yes,' Frederika breathed.

Leo nodded, as though he considered her reply satisfactory.

'You're not married?' he asked automatically.

She smiled down at her left hand. It was not innocent of a

ring or two. She let the light play on a little diamond that she had recently got out of pawn. But there was nothing on any of her fingers as simple as a plain gold band.

'And you?' her eyes asked him.

'Yes, I'm married. Don't know how it happened, but it did. We get along all right. I tell her more or less everything. There are just one or two little secrets I keep—like my stocks and shares.'

'It's like that, isn't it?' Frederika laughed. 'I'm sure you're happy, and I'm pleased. I always knew you'd come to it, when you were ready.'

Leo patted his stomach.

'I got married, and then I got this—I don't know where it came from—I was like a rake before.'

'Just let me look at you,' sighed Frederika, her head tilted, and eyes awash with sentiment. 'It's so good to see you.'

She wondered if she could still detect Blackpool in Leo's accent.

'He has the most glittering white teeth still,' she decided.

Leo seemed slightly moved now.

'It was fun,' he said. 'It all seems a long time ago. And now I'm married.' She continued to smile at him. 'But I haven't changed all that much,'—he seemed determined to show her that though older, and fat, and married, he had not opted out of life altogether—'I'm afraid I've still got a roving eye. At the moment there's a girl in the hat department,'—he continued as though he were being provoked—'She's a kid, but I'm really smitten. It's a problem.'

'Yes,' said Frederika good-humouredly.

Leo felt that she was indulging him, allowing him to think he was still the very young man she had known, unchanged except for his body.

'Young girls are all the same,' he said. 'It's natural for them to be interested in older men.'

Frederika again put her hand on his arm.

'I'll come up and have a look at her,' she said, conferring a favour.

Things were different, after all these years. Before, with experience on her side, she had been free to laugh at him. Now he was ascendent. Now at last she was flattering his sexual vanity.

They got up to go. As they sauntered together through the store, they found they were still well-matched. Frederika leaned on Leo, and for a few minutes the same fantasy filled the minds of each, though they did not speak. Frederika looked to right and left and inspected the rooms as though she were being installed there. She was transformed by her imagination into a stately mistress to whom some powerful man unfolded, room by room, the proof of his regard and the extent of her future comfort.

It was one of the dreams of her life, a dream which now would never be fulfilled. Leo, the man who had left her, stood in for all the men she had never attained.

Leo was by no means eager to spend money on women. But he enjoyed Frederika's reactions, he set a slow pace, and each new room they entered was a triumph of his inventiveness, a testimonial to his generosity. Moment by moment Frederika leaned on him more heavily. As they came to the end of one room, he looked forward to the display that would greet them in the next: not once was he disappointed.

'Nothing's happened,' he assured her. 'Not yet, at any rate. I don't suppose it will. After all, I'm happily married, officially.'

Frederika said nothing, this time she only looked. She saw

a feeling for the past come to him, like a faint perfume. She even imagined that he admired her. Something of the irritation and impotent rage he used to suffer when he was with her, some small essence of it, took possession of him. They had had good times together—now she was too old for him. He was still vital under the skin.

In these minutes, Leo knew what it was to have and to dispense generously. He was happy that Frederika should have all and more than all she saw.

They reached hats in a state of ecstasy. They looked at each other, and wondered, and saw themselves in each other. They felt kindly towards themselves.

There were several small tables in the department. Frederika sat at one of them, removed her hat, and looked at herself in the mirror which stood on the table.

Beside the table, level with the mirror, a second chair was placed for the convenience of the gentleman friend. Leo sat down and faced Frederika, who looked from her own reflection to Leo in the flesh.

Then she looked around her.

'There!' she said at last, breathing rapturously.

She put her hand to her throat as she turned to Leo for a moment. Then she pointed, with her black-gloved hand, still looking at Leo, and he followed the direction till his eye came to rest on a flowered hat on a distant counter.

'Would you like to try it on?' he asked.

She nodded greedily.

Leo smiled secretly, as though he had caught her out in a vice, and nodded to a girl standing nearby; 'I just can't resist a hat—I've got such a good head for a hat!' Frederika chattered, while the girl went to get the hat and brought it across to the table.

Frederika surveyed the girl coolly in the mirror, then swung round in her chair to take the hat from her in both her hands, gazing now not at the girl but only at the hat. The girl effaced herself, and Frederika was alone with her reflection in the mirror. She placed the hat on her head, adjusting the brim with straight fingers.

She put a forefinger thoughtfully to her chin.

'Wonderful,' said Leo.

With her forefinger, Frederika gently pushed her head round, till she found herself in half-profile. Then she laughed slightly, and broke the spell.

'It's not quite right,' she said seriously, as though criticising a work of art. 'It's—I don't know exactly what—it's a middle-aged hat, isn't it? It's not me, anyway.'

Leo leaned forward and gave her the gift of his full attention. He adjusted the set of the hat.

'No,' she said, irritably. 'It looks dreadful.'

Leo removed it from her head.

'So that's the girl, is it?' said Frederika without a pause.

'Yes,' said Leo.

'I think I've seen her somewhere already.'

Leo nodded to the girl again. Frederika turned specially to watch her as she came across to them. The girl lowered her eyes as she reached them, but Frederika felt that she herself had been under scrutiny. With perfect modesty, the girl took the hat and retired.

'I told you,' said Leo. 'Young. Rather pretty, don't you think?'

'Yes,' said Frederika doubtfully.

'You don't think so?'

'Oh, she's pretty all right.' Frederika was roused from her

reverie. 'It's not that. It's something else. I don't think she's exactly what she seems.'

'What do you mean?

'I can't explain. It's a funny thing. Do you know, she reminds me of myself.'

Frederika was surprised by her own words. She got up to go, strangely moved. Leo led her from the department, and neither looked at the girl again.

The girl approached Leo as soon as Frederika had gone.

'You know her?' she asked.

'Know her?' Leo looked at the girl in surprise. 'Yes,' he said, with heavy innuendo. 'She's a very old friend.'

'Oh,' said the girl, nodding her head.

'You know her?'

'I've seen her around,' said the girl casually. 'She lives in the same house as I do, as a matter of fact.'

'Really?' Leo played with the new idea. He looked at the girl thoughtfully, and wondered if it would be an increase of intimacy between them.

'She's rather a joke, really, in a way,' he said, deciding on a line to pursue. 'Mind you, she was lovely!' He whistled, to give her an idea how Frederika had been. 'I first met her over hats, as it happens. I was working in a small shop in those days. She always wanted a bargain. She used to pester us to let her borrow our hats for nothing—she said if she wore them at Ascot it would be an advertisement for us. Think of it! But she got away with absolute murder. She was such fun to be with! Something was always happening. And if nothing was happening, she would damn well make it happen.'

'Lucky her,' said the girl quietly.

'I'd lost touch with her, of course. Before today, I hadn't seen her for years.'

'Were you pleased to see her?'

'I don't know. Yes, I suppose I was. She's still fun, in a way.'

Jonah went to a gym near Shaftesbury Avenue. It was a sunny morning, and his body craved hardship. He strained at weights, and in his mind he substituted that joyous striding out into the countryside, shoulders flexed and chest bared, and toes biting into the resilient turf of mountain-sides, which before he had never in the least desired.

Afterwards, he relaxed in the changing room. He removed his shorts and sat on a wooden bench against the wall. His vest grew cold and stuck to his body. In his weariness, his head lolled forward, pulling at the neck-muscles.

A young man, a boy rather, certainly not more than a boy, came into the changing room. He had been using the gym at the same time as Jonah, but Jonah had been too busy, too absorbed in himself, to notice him. The boy glanced at Jonah as he passed him, and went over to the opposite corner, near the showers, turning his back as he took his clothes off shyly. His movements were secretive, they had no fulness. He gripped the hem of his vest and rolled it up over his chest, till for a moment he was standing with his arms stretched straight up over his head, the vest taut between his hands: the movement did not advertise the body suddenly revealed, did not demand light and air and sun for it. His shorts fell to the ground—he was unaware of triumphant nudity as he stepped out of them.

His young and beautiful body, naked, did not acquire radiance. From the slight curve of his hips, his body rose in

supple lines to his narrow chest. He knew nothing. He raised his arm, to adjust the shower, and instinctively he drew in his elbow across his chest. When the water broke against him, he tilted back his head to let the water catch his slender throat. Now he forgot his shyness, and for the first time his body relaxed into splendour.

Jonah contemplated this purity. He felt at a great distance from the naked boy. He pulled at his vest, which made him, clothed, a spectator of this nudity. The boy was aware of his regard, for once or twice he darted a look at Jonah, not brazen, or aggressive, only puzzled. He saw nothing in Jonah's face which he could understand. It might have been his nakedness alone, and not even another man's presence, which seemed to disturb him. His back to Jonah, he took soap and rubbed it over his body, with circular movements, roughly.

His face lacked definition. That could only come later, with manhood. He pushed back his wet hair and flattened it on his skull; in his empty face the timid eyes were exposed.

Jonah was conscious, with a sudden cruel shock, of the essential, utter commonplaceness of this face. With the first embrace of experience, it would become anonymous. It would be lost in a sea of ordinary men's faces. The sweet freshness of the body, its shy tremors questioning the mysteries of life, would be harshly used in living. It would lose its freshness.

The boy switched off the shower and padded across the lino to get his towel. As he dried himself, he handled himself delicately, tenderly exploring the backs of his arms and legs, the length of his neck.

Jonah was saddened to see this innocence seemingly without vitality. He had a dim idea in his mind that nature had

prepared a ritual for this boy in the life to come, a meaningless ritual of toil and fatherhood which would use up all the youth, the strength, the pathos. The boy would need vitality to submit with dignity, or vitality to escape it. Jonah shrugged, did not want to look at the empty face again with its timid eyes. He waited for the boy to dress himself and go.

Then he got up wearily. He dug his fingers into his thighs, and felt the muscles flex. He put his hand over the back of his shoulders and tugged at his vest. He felt his fingers squeeze his flesh. He strode over to the showers, and stepped into a rush of ice-cold water.

PART THREE

Frederika sat in her orange chair. She was knitting. Beside her, on the floor, was a wicker work-basket, lined with velvet.

She knitted slowly, deliberately. When she put out her hand to the work-basket, she was careful not to make quick movements. She was trying to create an air of calm about her.

Jonah was slumped on the sofa, with his legs crossed, and a book propped against his knee. There were more books on the floor, at his feet. As he read, between his finger and his thumb he ground the paper at the edge of the pages. When he turned over, he pushed back the page as though he were fighting it.

Frederika glanced at him from time to time: keeping her head bent over her knitting, she shot glances at him from under her eyebrows, and their speed and energy were contrary to the air of calm she created. She got up to saunter about the room, passing behind the sofa. Her small feet, in their slippers, lightly sensed the carpet under them. She wanted to know what was in Jonah's mind.

'You don't read comics any more,' she said to him, sitting down again.

'No,' he replied.

'It was Henty you were reading the other day.'

Jonah looked at the books at his feet.

'I had another go at it this afternoon. I didn't really like it.'

'I'm surprised to hear that,' said Frederika. 'We all used to love it as children. After all, what's nicer than an adventure story?'

Jonah did not answer.

Later she asked, 'And what are you reading now, Jonah?'

'Dostoievsky,' he replied.

Frederika seemed to consider.

'Oh, which one?'

'*The Idiot*.'

Frederika nodded her head, appearing to digest the information.

'That certainly makes a change. You never wanted to read anything like that before.' Jonah stopped reading, and looked at her coldly. It was he now who created an air of apparent calm about himself. Frederika went on knitting, not quickly, but with a slightly different rhythm. 'It's a far cry,' she said, 'from comics to Dostoievsky.'

'Maybe it is.' Jonah continued to look at her coldly. 'But you don't really know, do you? It's not as if you've actually read any Dostoievsky.' Frederika did not reply, but she laid down her knitting. 'I don't suppose you like the idea of my reading a proper book.'

Jonah's tone was deliberately challenging, and he was no longer calm.

'I think that's an awfully silly thing to say, Jonah.' Frederika shook her head slowly. 'It's not fair. I've felt the atmosphere in this flat over the past weeks, and I don't like it. You resent me. I know it—I've told Gray as much. It's

always the same. I've seen it again and again. Whenever someone is not satisfied with his life, he blames his mother. That's an easy way out. It would be better if you tried to do something for yourself, instead of blaming me for everything. If you're not happy, you must leave here. Go away and start again.'

'You didn't educate me,' said Jonah. Brooding on a single obsession, he could not for the moment take in the full import of his mother's words. 'You made me read comics, you kept me a child, and now you sneer because I'm reading a proper book.'

'It wasn't convenient to have you at school.' Frederika was again perfectly composed. 'But you always had tutors—excellent young men, I chose them very carefully. Boys from the best families have learned from tutors. But you were always different from other boys—you were never interested in anything, you wouldn't work, you had no hobbies. You could have done anything—horse-riding, sailing, skiing—but nothing interested you. You could have gone to the theatre as often as you wanted. Nothing! Has it ever occurred to you to wonder what I was feeling all this time? Other women had some . . . All you did was sit about reading comics or going to the pictures.'

Jonah did not reply at once.

'You didn't want me to do anything else,' said Jonah finally.

'Oh come!' said Frederika, a little impatient. 'What could I do? I often blamed myself—I'll admit that, I thought that if things had been different . . . But it's not true. You can't make anyone read comics if he doesn't want to. You just didn't want to do anything, and that was the end of it. I don't understand you.'

'Are you frightened, mother, that now I'll grow away from you?'

Frederika's eyes turned to the window.

'Perhaps that would be a good thing. Who knows?' Her eyes returned to his face. 'Do you think you can achieve so much by reading a single book? I don't suppose,' she said wearily, 'that you even understood a single word of it.'

'I do! It's about pain and suffering. I do understand it!'

Frederika shrugged irritably.

'You're far too young—what do you know of pain and suffering? When you reach my age, when you've been through what I've been through, then you'll know something about it!'

'When a man suffers,' said Jonah, 'his soul speaks to God. No experience in life, however wretched, need be wasted.'

'Quite true—I expect Gray explained it to you.'

'What if he did?'

'The truth is,' said Frederika, speaking very seriously now, 'that Gray is a good man, and you don't appreciate him. You won't let him give you the love that is in him to give, though let me tell you love is a lot more rare than you realise. He tries to educate you instead. It's so futile.'

'I don't see why. It will help me to be somebody.'

'As if that's all it needs.' Frederika permitted herself a bitter smile. 'You're a funny boy. You pretend to read a serious book, you attack me with a few phrases Gray has taught you, and you think you can spite me, to pay me back for all those imaginary wrongs I've done to you. To think that once, and not so long ago either, you were a pale boy frightened to move out of your mother's shadow!'

'Yes—only think! I'm different now!'

'You're not. You're the same. You'll always be the same!' Jonah got up, book in hand.

'There's no peace here. I shall go into my bedroom to read.'

'Don't forget,' said Frederika, 'that you're going to the theatre with Gray tonight.'

He moved disdainfully to the door.

'I don't know if I feel like it.'

'You have to go,' said Frederika quietly.

'Yes?'

'Well, don't you?' Frederika looked at her son. 'It's a funny thing—I've told Gray this—he and I could get on so well, if it wasn't for you.'

'You wouldn't be here, if it wasn't for me.' Jonah threw his book on the sofa. 'I'm fed up. I'm going out. I won't go to the theatre either. If you two get on so well, why don't you go off with him?'

And he walked straight out of the flat.

Frederika began knitting again, intently. When Gray came home, she felt a little nervous of him. She was sure he would blame her. She did not get up from her chair to welcome him.

'Jonah went rushing out,' she said. 'I don't even know if he's coming back in time to go to the theatre with you. I was with him the whole afternoon, and we hardly spoke—then I asked him what he was reading and he took offence. I just remarked that it was strange to see him reading a serious book for a change. I'm sure you'll agree that there's nothing wrong in that. He's so unpredictable these days.'

Gray took a moment to reflect on the situation.

'You said nothing else to upset him?'

'He accused me of . . . oh, the usual things. Of trying to

keep him tied to my apron strings. The usual things.' Frederika looked appraisingly at Gray. 'He thinks much as you do on that subject.'

Gray opened his mouth to speak. He had been ready to criticise again Frederika's handling of her son. But he thought better of it. He feared the implied criticism of his own behaviour in Frederika's words.

'As if,' said Frederika more confidently, 'I really want him to go on all his life reading comics, taking no interest in anything. I don't think even you think that—not now, now you know Jonah better, and me better.'

Gray sighed, and turned away, as though he would like to have shrugged off the whole problem.

'Perhaps I've been too easy with him. I've let him have his own way too much.' Instinctively, he turned back to catch Frederika's reaction—he was coming, in spite of himself, to rely on her approval. Frederika thought it wise at this stage to offer no opinion. She watched him walk about the room, and focused all her sympathy on him. 'I don't want to be hard—it's not my way. But in the long run it's not always a good thing to keep giving way. Some people find it difficult to behave properly, and it's easier for them when someone takes a firm line. Besides, I'm determined not to be taken advantage of.' Frederika nodded, as though Gray's word confirmed beliefs she had long held. 'You agree with me?' he asked, his assurance slightly lessened when he found himself with no opposition. 'Of course you do,' he reminded himself. 'It's more or less what you said from the very first.'

'It's not kind to spoil people,' said Frederika, spelling out a lesson. 'For one thing, I don't think it would be good for Jonah to imagine you can get anything for nothing. He must realise that he has to accept a certain amount of responsi-

bility. Young people today want everything to come to them easily.'

'You don't want me to spoil Jonah?'

'Exactly.'

'Things will be different from now on.'

Frederika rose to her feet and walked towards Gray.

'I must say this now—that whatever you decide to do, however things turn out, you have my respect. I've seen enough of you to know that you are a rare person.'

They drew apart. Frederika, moved by her sentiments, sat down again.

'Gray,' she said, from the throne. 'Let's not make ourselves unhappy over the boy. It's ridiculous, two grown people letting themselves be dominated like this. You must go ahead, you must go to the theatre just as you planned. He mustn't see that he can command your comings and goings.'

'That's a good idea.' Gray took a step towards her. 'I don't like to ask you to be a substitute . . .'

Frederika gazed at him with indulgence.

'If you're thinking of asking me to go with you in Jonah's place, why, I'd be delighted. I won't be offended. You couldn't offend me, Gray—I know you.'

'That's settled then,' he said, with rather less than the measure of relief and pleasure she had expected.

'We could even have supper out after the show. There's no reason why we shouldn't have an agreeable evening together. Show Jonah that he is not in every way indispensable. It will be a good lesson for him.'

'Maybe,' said Gray, preoccupied. 'We'll see how we feel.'

'Good,' said Frederika loyally. 'I'm delighted to see you take a firm line.'

Jonah felt that his whole world was his mother and Gray. It was not, he decided, enough. He left the flat in a rage, ready to burst out of his life. But there was nothing he could do. There were people abroad, on the pavements, in buses and cars, but they all had business of their own, and no one took any notice of him. The daylight world was no use to him—it might as well have been a moon landscape. He escaped from it into a cinema—a shadow himself, he communed with shadows on the screen.

Time passed, and it was evening. When he came out again, there was still light. He was thrown back into his life, onto his mother and Gray. But he hoped for adventure. He wanted something new to happen to him today. He didn't want to face the flat and its inhabitants as the Jonah already known there: he wanted first, through some encounter, through a new experience, to become a new Jonah to surprise, to astound, to spite them both.

Nothing happened. There was less traffic in the streets than earlier in the day, and less people about. And still the same indifference. He began to make his way back, still hoping for a miracle. He hoped now that Gray had gone to the theatre, and taken his mother in his place. That way, if adventure eluded him, he would have at least a few hours more of solitude.

Tonight, the graceful curve of the crescent pleased him. There was hardly anyone passing through. When he came to the house, his steps dragging, he decided not to go indoors at once. He sat on the steps of the house, breathing the evening.

It was some time later when he saw a girl in the distance. She approached and crossed the road from the other side of the crescent, and he wondered if it was the girl he had seen

from the window. She nodded to him as she passed him on the steps, fumbling in her bag for her key. Jonah looked up at her over his shoulder.

'I've got such a mess in my bag,' she said pleasantly.

Jonah rose to his feet.

'You can't find your key?'

'No,' she said. Then she looked at him properly. 'You live here don't you?'

'Yes,' Jonah replied. 'I thought I'd seen you before.' He put his hand in his pocket, and touched his own key.

'Ah,' she said, delightedly plucking her key from her bag. She smiled quickly and turned from him to unlock the door.

Jonah moved away, and once more looked out on the crescent.

'Are you waiting for someone?' the girl asked behind him. 'You're not locked out, are you?'

'I am, actually,' said Jonah, turning again towards her.

'It's a bit silly for you to wait out here. Look,' she said shyly, 'would you like to come up? You can wait in my flat.'

'Most awfully. . . .' Jonah murmured, shifting from one foot to the other.

'Right, then.' She nodded slightly, and went in before him and up the stairs.

Jonah was not absolutely sure that Gray and his mother had gone out. For all he knew they might be brooding indoors. He slid past the door and sighed with relief when he reached the landing above.

'It's a long climb,' the girl said. 'Sorry.'

They continued till they reached the top of the house. She unlocked her door, pushed it open, and went in quickly. She switched the light on, and looked round.

'It's a bit of a mess, I'm afraid—I wasn't expecting anyone.'

She began at once to bustle about, as though by patting a cushion here and there she could prettify a shabby flat. Jonah had always accepted luxury as the marrow of his life. This shabby flat was something new to him: he would have preferred to enjoy a new encounter in the usual luxurious surroundings.

It was hardly a flat at all. It was a single room with a divan bed, and behind a partition a gas cooker and bath, together.

'Do sit down,' the girl said, waving to an armchair. Jonah crossed the room and sat down.

The girl looked at him sideways, hoping he would approve of her home.

'Coffee?' she asked him.

'Lovely,' he said.

He was used to having things done for him. As the girl moved to the partition, unsure of herself, his self-esteem was increased. She was evidently concerned with the impression she made on him.

'The kettle's on,' she said, returning almost at once. 'Shouldn't take too long.' Jonah nodded. 'My name's Susan.'

'I'm Jonah.'

'You're staying with Mr Linton?'

'Yes.' Jonah chose not to go into any details. The girl waited with a shy smile on her lips. She had soft brown eyes.

'I've been here about two years,' said Susan. 'I like it.'

She went off with relief to make the coffee. When she came back with a tray, she was happier, with something to do. She took the lid off the coffee-pot and stirred the coffee

vigorously. Jonah compared her clear, tidy movements with his mother's vainglorious ones. They sat with coffee in their laps and Susan watched him raise his cup to his lips.

'It's strong enough, isn't it?' she asked. 'You know, I should go to a psychiatrist—I've no small talk. At least, only when I drink, and I won't let myself. How old are you?'

'Eighteen,' Jonah told her.

'I'm twenty-two. I'm older than you.'

'Twenty-two is young—I'm used to much older people.'

'I was going to make myself something to eat,' she said.

'Will you have something too?'

'That's awfully kind of you. It's not putting you to too much trouble, I hope.'

'It'll only be omelettes. I'm sorry I haven't got anything more to offer you. I wasn't expecting anyone, you see.'

'That will be wonderful.'

Susan gathered up the cups and went with the tray back to her kitchen. Jonah lounged in the door of the partition. While she worked in the small space, Jonah felt that his body, snaking against the doorframe, was like a piece of expensive, baroque ornamentation.

'Can I help?' he asked, enjoying the intimacy of the scene.

'Not really,' she answered. 'There's not much room. Unless'—she brushed her forehead with the back of her hand—'Unless you'd like to grate some vegetables for salad.'

She cleared a space for him to work in. She was very definite in what she did, while his mother seemed to be so extravagant—yet his mother was far more efficient. Jonah was beginning to be amused by her seriousness. She watched him carefully, and Jonah felt that she would have much preferred to be doing all of it herself. When everything was

ready, Jonah went back to the divan room carrying the omelettes, while Susan followed with the salad and cruets on the tray.

'Yours is the one on the blue plate,' she said emphatically.
'It's the best plate.'

'Thank you,' said Jonah.

They ate from their laps, with the tray on the floor between them.

'This is all—very nice,' said Jonah suddenly. It was, he imagined, a normal evening: it was the way he expected ordinary people in the world to pass their time. 'I'm so glad we met.'

'Yes?' said Susan, a trifle surprised.

'It's like a picnic.'

'I suppose it is.' Susan laughed her very pleasant laugh.
'You must come again. You're an easy guest.'

When the meal was over, Jonah looked at his watch.

'My mother and Mr Linton have gone to the theatre together, they might be back by now.'

'You don't want to go just yet, do you?'

'It's getting late,' said Jonah rising. 'I really must.' She did not try to stop him.

Standing on the landing, outside the flat, he wondered suddenly if she expected him to kiss her. There was no reason for him to. The gulf between the harmony of sitting and cooking and eating together, and of kissing, seemed immense. He could not envisage any further move, short of the kiss itself, which would make the gulf less.

She held out her hand to him awkwardly. He took it, pressed it. When she drew back her hand, he wondered if he had held it too long.

He moved off, hoping she would not think he was afraid

of her. When he was far enough away, she waved, and went back inside.

Jonah slipped lightly down the stairs. He thought slyly of how his mother and Gray would feel when he told them he had been with a girl. He wondered if they would find him changed at all. They ought, he thought, laughing at himself, to see the beginning of a new, independent life written on him.

They were not home yet. He settled down happily in the luxurious flat to wait for them. Lazily he took up the Dostoevsky, and laid it open on his knee.

Outside it had begun to rain a little. Jonah found the noise of the rain soothing. He wandered to the window, and enjoyed the fresh smell rising from the pavements.

He returned to his book, but found it hard to concentrate. Again he wandered to the window. A taxi pulled up in front of the house, and he saw Gray get out and hold the door open; Frederika darted from it and made a dash for the steps, holding her hand up as a shield against the rain.

'Poor mother,' thought Jonah. 'She hates the elements.'

He composed himself on the sofa again, with the open book, and waited for them. He heard their key in the lock.

'You're so silly not to have gone,' cried Frederika, bursting in on him. 'It was wonderful. We had a simply wonderful evening.' She went to the mirror. 'It's pelting down. My hair's ruined. I only had it set yesterday.' She patted it carefully, and in the mirror watched Gray looking at Jonah. She turned, all smiles. 'It's the sort of play in which the characters talk about themselves simply all the time, so naturally everyone says it's very sensitive.' She stepped closer to Jonah. 'Mind you, the evening was nearly spoiled for me. We sat next to a woman who was using Friar's Balsam as

perfume. Yes, Gray,' she insisted, 'I swear she was.' She stopped talking, and there was silence. 'Have you had any supper, Jonah?' she asked. 'We haven't eaten ourselves yet. We came straight home after the theatre. We're going to have a snack—would you like me to make you something at the same time?'

Jonah was casual, but he lowered his eyes when he spoke.

'I'm not hungry, actually. I had supper with the girl upstairs.'

He raised his eyes to his mother's. Frederika was looking at him steadily.

'Oh, yes,' she said.

'I met her outside. She spoke to me first. Then she asked me to have supper with her, as I was alone.'

'How very kind of her,' said Frederika.

'Yes,' said Jonah. 'It was. She went to a lot of trouble. I suppose,' he said hesitantly, 'that we ought to ask her here one day—by way of return.'

Frederika's voice was expressionless.

'If you'd like to, you must ask Gray. It's his flat, after all.'

She was standing between Jonah and Gray. She moved away, and with a slight gesture of her hand brought Gray closer to Jonah, almost as though effecting an introduction.

Gray did not look at Frederika. Slowly, Jonah found his eyes drawn to Gray's.

'I must talk to Jonah,' he said quietly.

Frederika sighed, drew herself up, and looked at herself in the mirror, briefly, for reassurance.

'I think you ought to go to your own room, then,' she said. She laughed nervously. 'It's not for me to tell you

where to go—it's your flat, your home—but after all, wherever you are, the bedroom is the place for scenes, isn't it?'

Gray reacted irritably.

'Yes.' He continued to look at Jonah. 'It is my flat, I'm glad that one of you at least realises it.'

'I've never taken Jonah's part against you,' said Frederika.

'Are Jonah and I against one another now?'

'It will all work out,' said Frederika, embarrassed.

Gray looked from mother to son. Frederika gazed at him wide-eyed.

'I hope I haven't offended again—it's the last thing. . . .'

'I'm confused, that's all.'

'Ah,' said Frederika smugly, as though entirely uninvolved.

'That is the human condition.'

Gray looked at her, a little more sharply this time.

'It's not something on which we ought to congratulate ourselves.'

'Quite,' she echoed him. 'How I agree.'

'Jonah.' Gray nodded towards the door. 'I think we'd best go inside.'

Jonah did not betray his uncertainty by the least quiver.

'If you like,' he said. He went to the door, and motioned Gray to go ahead of him. He smiled as Gray passed him, and did not glance at his mother again as he followed.

Frederika, left alone, put her hand on her heart. It was beating fast.

'What do they want of me?' she grumbled. 'I'm a poor old woman. Can't I have any peace?'

Only a little while ago, or so it seemed, she had talked with Gray. They had reached an understanding: they had settled down to their life together within these walls. Frederika had

gone to Harrods, had met Henrietta from her past life, and Leo. That day she had been happy.

And now everything was going to change again. Again she would have to adapt. They were putting too much on her.

Tired, she sat down. She leaned her head against the back of the chair. She did not want to see herself. There was every likelihood that now she looked old indeed.

Her mind was troubled. Jonah was in her mind. He was with a girl. It was too much for her to accept. Maybe once she had wanted it—she could hardly remember—but it was too late for that, their life had set, and there was no place in it for Jonah with a girl. She did not want it any more. It was the last thing she wanted.

She tried to envisage the girl upstairs. She had seen her coming and going. Something worried her about the girl. It was at this moment that the girl at Harrods came into her mind—the girl that Leo was interested in. She had not till this moment associated one girl with the other.

Her past life, and her present troubles, became one in the person of the girl upstairs. Henrietta, an old woman with skin like leather, had been bad luck to her; and the girl upstairs was bad luck to her now. A Susan for a Henrietta. Frederika saw no joy in her life to come.

Jonah thrust the bedroom window wide open. It was still raining. The smell of it rose to his nostrils again. Gray was behind him in the room. He closed the door after Jonah and leaned against it, watching the boy at the window.

'Jonah,' said Gray helplessly.

'Yes?'

Jonah gave him no help.

'Turn round,' said Gray, forcing a note of menace into his

voice. 'If we're going to talk at last, you must look at me.'

Jonah turned slowly.

'Is this right?'

Gray gazed at him as though seeing him for the first time.

'What's the matter?' Jonah asked.

'I don't know if it's going to be any use,' said Gray helplessly. 'But we must talk,'—he clenched his fists—'And try not to treat me as an enemy. We've never really talked. Don't make it more difficult for me. It's serious; if we can't talk properly to each other at last, we had better part now.'

'Part!' Jonah exclaimed. 'What have I done? You agreed. . . .'

Gray stopped him with an impatient gesture.

'You're so young—how can I explain anything to you? Don't you see—the last thing I want is to part from you.' He dropped his voice. 'I think it would break me.' Jonah started. He had not expected this intensity of feeling. 'Does that surprise you?' Gray asked, 'It would be better, cleaner . . . he bowed his head. 'We can't go on like this, living next to each other, seeing each other every day, making no contact, giving each other nothing.'

'I don't know what to say,' said Jonah, feeling his way.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' Gray passed his hand over his brow. 'You're so young, I was forgetting. All this is too much for you. You're a child.' Jonah moved nearer the bed. 'But that's no excuse. You may be a child—but children feel. Don't you feel anything? Aren't you alive?'

'You give me a lot,' said Jonah.

'What?'

'Well, let me think.' Jonah was surprised to find himself quite sincere. 'There's always money, of course, money and

food for myself and my mother. That's a lot,' he insisted, as Gray made an impatient gesture. 'And your benevolence, we mustn't forget that.' Irony began to creep into his voice. 'You mean well by me, you want to help me. Oh yes, you do, you said so. You give me books to read—one day, I'll grow, you promised me. Perhaps I'll be worthy of you, who knows.'

He ended awkwardly, smiling with one side of his mouth only.

Gray shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

'It sounds a little absurd, doesn't it, now you describe it. It wasn't an easy situation for me. Perhaps you feel I despised you, but I didn't. I was happy with you as you were when I found you. If things had been happy between us, I would never have wanted you any different. I was prepared to adore you exactly as you were. I've been so wrapped up in my own unhappiness—it never occurred to me that I may have hurt your feelings.'

'To you,' said Jonah, taking advantage, 'I was just the ignorant boy you picked up from the streets.'

'Hardly the streets,' Gray protested.

'It's all the same.'

'I didn't despise you,' Gray repeated.

'Oh God, I can't talk to you, how can I make you understand? I wanted to love you—we all have different ways. I would have cared for you, but you wouldn't let me. So I tried other ways to reach you. It's ridiculous. You can't educate a lover when there is no love; it's a wretched substitute. Do you even know what I'm talking about?'

Gray bowed his head again. For a moment Susan's image printed itself on Jonah's mind.

'I think I do understand,' he said, after a moment.

He laid a hand on Gray's shoulder.

'No,' said Gray. 'You don't.'

'You want to make love to me again, isn't that right?' The mattress moved as Jonah put his knee on it. 'All right. I don't mind.'

Gray's bent head did not move for a moment. Then he hid his head in his hands.

'It is I that am the child,' he murmured.

Jonah again thought of Susan.

'I don't think worse of you,' he said.

'All, all children to our appetites,' said Gray. 'Is this what should happen? Is it right? I don't know. Perhaps it is what I wanted. I thought we would talk. That's what I had in my mind. I had no other thought.'

'All right, all right,' said Jonah casually. 'What difference?'

'There is a lot of difference,' said Gray, raising his head. 'It's a question of pride, of self-respect.'

'Oh yes,' said Jonah casually.

Frederika's night was full of dreams. She saw her old face next to the smooth face of the girl from Harrods. Her own face was a mask; rage swelled up from within her, and the lines deepened on it. The girl spoke only with her eyes. She was wearing a white nightdress; she seized an ice-pick and dug it again and again into Frederika's old body. All the while, her face remained perfectly smooth.

Frederika woke, and though her tongue was still, she was calling with all her might, with her whole being, with everything which was not her tongue, for her son Jonah.

She clasped her hands on her stomach. She recalled the pain of giving birth. She created again the pain, and bit into

her lip to stop herself crying out against it. Now she fought it, and tried to conquer it, but it took possession of her whole body.

'I have put him out of my body into the light,' she thought. 'Is that not enough?'

Where, in her small frame, was there room for the large creature with the long bright limbs, for the being at once her own flesh and stranger, for the being she knew as Jonah her son. There was no magic in the name Jonah, no magic in the word son. He was a heaven-sent bright creature, who was the light and air of the world.

'He tore himself once from my unwilling body—he is once-born, is that not enough? Insatiable creature—he would tear my flesh, break my bones, spill my blood yet again. He would be twice-born. I will not countenance it!'

Jonah. My son. Names, nothing. Letters from the Tarot, no more. Light by which she saw, and air to breathe.

It was dawn. The world was without colour, ashes made trees and buildings, ashes the taste in her mouth. She rose from her bed and looked on the world she must inhabit. She clasped the pillow from her bed, and rocked with it, moaning, till she quieted herself, and the demons under her skin began to relent.

'Thee, Jonah, I cast from me,' she said aloud. She threw the pillow away to the far corner of the room. 'You have destroyed me as a mother, as a mother I am dead, and you have condemned me to wait now for my second, earthly death. Oh the years without colour, the years without joy which wait for me. Oh the multiplying crocodile teeth of the years that wait! Thee Frederika I devour.' She hugged herself and rocked to and fro. Tears ran down her cheeks. 'I will devour him. Not me the years devour—I Frederika him

devour!' She drew back her lips from her teeth. 'I him devour. Not for me one death piled upon another. For him the death! Dead in me—and born again my child!'

She hugged herself closer. 'I shall give him to the world again—a child in me again!'

She clasped her belly. 'I feel him,' she cried. 'Oh the joy of it! He stirs!' She looked down at her flat belly, and laughed. 'Where is he hiding, that long-limbed son of mine. Where is he, that limb of Satan?' She laughed again.

Outside the trees rustled. The world was coming alive to her.

'You see,' said Jonah to Gray in the morning. 'You can't think I was pretending. I do like you—I really do.'

Gray stirred.

'Yes,' he answered.

He woke slowly, his mouth first, then his mind, and later his senses, from their sleep.

'Jonah,' he said.

'What?'

Jonah half sat up, leaning on his elbow.

'I'm glad we talked. We made a bridge. We've reached an understanding.'

Jonah smiled.

'Last night,' he said, 'you made me nervous. You were almost hysterical. I hardly understood what you were talking about.'

'I'm sorry.'

'You trust me?'

'Of course,' said Gray, moving his heavy limbs.

Jonah, idly, moved higher in the bed, till he was looking

at Gray's face on the pillow upside down. Gray's eyes were closed, making a mask of his face.

'Gray,' said Jonah.

'What?'

'I'm not entirely happy with my life here, either. I don't want to go on like this, just seeing you and my mother—it isn't enough for me.'

Gray's eyelids flickered, but he did not open his eyes.

'What do you want, then?'

Jonah looked at the mask below him—it had nothing to do with the living man he knew.

'I don't know. But this flat isn't the whole world. I want to see other people. There's the girl upstairs; I liked being with her. I'd like to see her again. Would you mind that?'

Jonah was breathless when he finished speaking.

Gray opened his eyes, and tried to focus them on Jonah's face looming above him. He closed them again.

'I know I could never have you all to myself. You're young.' He hurried as he recounted Jonah's attributes. 'You're young and vital, you're beautiful. Your mother and I, we're used up.'

'Oh come,' said Jonah.

'But I need you. I need your presence, your body. I'll give you all the money you want, and I'll help you in any way I can. As long as you don't leave me. I won't try and shut you up here. You can come and go as you like. Only be kind to me.'

Jonah stroked the upside-down face.

Gray got up. Jonah reclined in the empty bed, his eyes wide open, vacant.

Frederika, in her dressing-gown, was ranging the kitchen.

When she heard Gray's step approaching, she started, for she felt she could not face anyone. She wrapped her dressing-gown closer round her chest, and leaned on the sink.

'Good-morning,' said Gray. 'Good gracious—are you all right?'

He took her hand in his.

Frederika put her hand to her face. She wondered if the dream of the night was written there. She wanted to keep her thoughts hidden.

'I was worried,' she said. 'I didn't sleep too well, that's all.' She searched Gray's face, preferring to see herself there than in a mirror. Today, the first time in her life, she had avoided mirrors. 'Do I look so terrible?'

'Tired,' said Gray. 'I had quite a shock when I first saw you. You shouldn't have got up. I could have made my own breakfast.'

Frederika turned to the stove.

Gray sat benignly at table, watching her back. She was determined not to speak first. Her movements were small and stiff.

Gray enjoyed the moment, but did not prolong it.

'We talked,' he said, 'Jonah and I. We reached an understanding.'

'I'm glad,' she replied.

When she turned again to face him Gray was struck by the contrast between the tone of her voice and her appearance. She was a haggard wraith.

'We're lovers again,' said Gray.

'I thought you had been lovers all the time.'

'Not recently. But we'll settle down now.' Gray sat comfortable, and rather than in Jonah himself, he found proof of his success in the distressed woman before him. It was

as though he had been battling with the mother, not with the son.

'You must keep a check on him.'

'Yes?' said Gray, frowning.

'Yes!' Frederika was vehement. 'He's becoming restless. He's ready for some devilment.' She pulled out a chair and sat down opposite Gray. 'You think because he's young, and knows nothing of the world, that you can handle him. But I know him. You're deeply involved with Jonah, and I'm worried for you.'

'For me, or for yourself?'

'Don't fight me,' she rebuked him. 'This is no time for small feelings! You're sitting there so smugly—you feel you have achieved a triumph. But the situation is far more difficult than you know. Jonah is not wilfully cruel. I admit, he may even be fond of you. But I warn you. I know my son. He can't care for anyone. If you're weak, he will destroy you!'

'I think you exaggerate,' said Gray, fully in command of himself.

'You've made love, and you think there's nothing more to it than that! What children you all are, you men!'

'Besides, he does care for someone. He cares for you!'

Gray was taken aback by Frederika's reaction. She leaned forward across the table, her eyes wide and stabbing.

'You think so, you think so,' she hissed. She clasped her hands together, and pressed them to her bosom. 'If only I could believe that!'

'You're obsessed with him,' said Gray irritably. 'It's ridiculous. He's grown up. I tell you, it's more than ridiculous, it's downright obscene.'

Frederika looked at him, and laughed quietly, without pleasure.

'Don't interfere. You don't understand. Just be his lover. Let me be his mother.'

'I'm a friend to him, as well as his lover,' said Gray, rising. 'I promised to help him. If I do nothing else for him, just helping him grow beyond your influence would be enough.'

'I am on your side, don't you see,' said Frederika wearily. 'I want to keep things as they are. I have had enough of changes. You're happy, aren't you—you don't want any change? So you must handle Jonah with caution. If you can't handle him, help me to handle him.'

'We may be happy with this life. Jonah is not happy. He wants to see other people. I don't see why he shouldn't. I can't make a prisoner of him.' Frederika was watching him intently. 'He told me this morning that he wants to see the girl upstairs.'

'I knew it,' Frederika breathed.

'Well, why shouldn't he?' said Gray defiantly. 'Let him! We have to give him a chance to make his own mind up about the life he is going to lead. I shan't like it if he has an affair with the girl. But I shall accept it. If I have only a part of him, I shall be grateful. You see, I really care for him more than you do! I want his good. He must be allowed to choose his own way in life, and you don't seem to want him to have this chance.'

'You call this caring,' said Frederika, shaking her head. 'You care for him, and you can bear to see him with someone else.'

'I even accept,' Gray went on, 'that he may want to leave me one day. He may go off with a girl, who knows, maybe

the girl upstairs. I must be big enough to accept it. I don't count on having him for ever.'

'I count on having him for ever!' Frederika was hunched in her chair. She took gulps of air, as though her lungs could never take enough. 'You've changed, Gray. You've become so self-satisfied. And you try to deceive yourself. You do count on having him for ever. If you thought there was any danger of losing him, you'd never let him go out with a girl. And you won't admit that you're jealous of my hold over him. You say you will share Jonah with other people—you won't, you don't even want to share him with me. But Jonah hardly exists without me.' Gray looked down at her, unruffled. 'You don't want to understand, do you?'

'I don't consider you in this,' said Gray. 'It's Jonah I'm thinking of.'

'Give me my son back—then let us go. He's all I've got. You can get yourself another boy. Believe me, it will be the best thing in the long run. It will be the best thing for you.'

'It's for Jonah to decide. You are in no position to dictate now.'

Frederika put her hand to her heart. Gray stepped towards her.

'Frederika,' he said. 'Are you ill? We're two old people, we shouldn't quarrel like this.'

Frederika put her hand on the table, and forced herself to her feet.

'Don't worry about me,' she said firmly. 'I know myself. I will always manage.'

Gray shrugged and went to the door.

'I didn't make you breakfast after all,' she said.

'I haven't got time now. I'll slip out from the shop and get something.'

While he was still in the room, Frederika stood erect. When he had gone, she collapsed into a chair, and laid her head on the table. She could not cry.

'I never thought this would happen,' she said to herself. 'Not in my wildest dreams did I imagine such a thing! I've become a monster. Gray's right—I'm obsessed with my son! I had such a full life once. So many people—and money and luxury. I used to enjoy my life. Now it's changed. Suddenly there's only Jonah. He's all I've got. I need him so. And he needs me. I'm sure he needs me. If he left me, he would never manage. But I can't see him with a girl. It would kill me, it would more than kill me. Gray doesn't supplant me in his life, but a girl would. There would be no room in his life for me, if he found a girl. It's true, I'm a monster. Yet I don't feel any different. I'm still the same tired, sad woman. Yes, the same sad, old woman.'

Later, Frederika went to her room to dress. She made up with her usual care: she created new planes to her face, worked new colour into her skin. When she had finished, she tried out her face in smiles and frowns.

Jonah made his appearance at last, and she was grateful for the trouble she had taken. Jonah looked wonderful. As he sat at table and awaited his breakfast, she could only admire him. He was faultless. Before crossing his legs, he carefully pulled up his slacks to preserve the creases. He glowed. She was not sure, but she thought she detected new lines to his face; he had the bloom of youth, but now there was a hint of growing up, there was hope in his face of the man to come.

Frederika was proud of him, and afraid. She was glad that she did not appear before him a slattern.

'Gray was in good spirits this morning,' Frederika began. 'He seemed content.'

'We've worked things out,' said Jonah casually. 'We made a bridge.'

Frederika wanted him to tell her more.

'You must be on your guard,' she said, when she saw that he had no intention of confiding in her, 'At the moment Gray will accept anything from you.'

'And why shouldn't he go on accepting anything?'

Frederika stopped working at the stove.

'We must try to be honest with each other now,' she said. 'I can still teach you a lot, you know. I'm still your mother.'

'Just as you like.' It was obvious that Jonah did not care.

'You've made Gray happy in bed,' said Frederika.

'And I'll keep him happy,' said Jonah, slightly embarrassed by his mother's frankness.

'They say of marriage,' Frederika went on, against his pretended indifference, 'that if the bedroom is happy then every room in the house is happy. This happens not to be true. There is more to living together than just bed.'

'My eggs should be done by now,' said Jonah.

Frederika went back to the stove.

'What I am saying,' she continued, 'is that you must not push Gray too hard. Don't be complacent.'

She sat opposite him while she ate.

'Is the food all right?' she asked. 'Have I given you enough?'

He nodded, his mouth full.

'Don't worry mother,' he said, as he finished eating. 'We're quite safe here. I've made my attitude clear to Gray and we've come to a definite arrangement.'

'Things don't stay the same, alas. I'm afraid they change all the time. Besides, you talked to him in bed. Things look different later on.'

'I told you not to worry.' Jonah began to be irritable. 'Gray has got to accept—I'm the one who makes the conditions. If he's not happy, we can leave. It won't be the end of the world. At any rate, not for us.'

Frederika looked at him, and saw a stranger.

'You frighten me.'

'As you say, things change. I've changed. You're frightened, but I'm not frightened of anything. I've decided to get about a bit more in future.' He leaned back in his chair, and watched her slyly out of the corner of his eye. 'I'm making a start with the girl upstairs. I've decided to meet her again. I enjoyed my evening with her.'

Frederika did not flinch. She had expected this moment. She had make-up on her face, and used her face as a mask. No expression forced its way through.

'Just as you like,' she said. 'I think Gray mentioned it. It's rather silly, but if you'll enjoy seeing her, go ahead. I don't know why you want to risk upsetting Gray. Especially now, when things have settled down so nicely. It's almost as if you want to tempt the fates.'

She caught Jonah's eye on her, and stopped. She wondered if she had not already said too much. She did not want him to know her feelings yet, or his power over her.

'It's nothing serious,' said Jonah, tipping his chair back. 'It's just as well that Gray,'—he lingered over the name, so that Frederika should know that it was not Gray alone

that he meant—'should realise that I'm not a prisoner here. He'll have more respect for me.'

'It's possible.' Frederika lifted the teapot. 'More tea?'

'Thanks.' Jonah brought his chair back to earth, and held out his cup. 'I'll go up tonight and see if she's free.'

'You don't know where this girl works, do you?' said Frederika cautiously. She decided, for the time being, to try to keep up a pretence of helping Jonah with the girl.

'No.'

'I don't pretend to approve of this, Jonah,' she said cautiously. 'But of course you have the handling of Gray, and tactful as I always try to be with him, in the last analysis you're the one who knows him best. You know how far you can go.' She wondered whether Jonah would believe in her good intentions. 'So I shall accept,' she continued, 'that you're going to see this girl again. And if you are, I don't want you to make a fool of yourself. If you're going to do something, you might as well do it properly. If you'd known where the girl works, you could have rung her first. A girl likes to have notice—and besides, she may be busy tonight.'

'I didn't think of asking her.'

Frederika laughed.

'Really, darling, what on earth did you find to talk about all evening? You must show interest in people, you know, at least if you want anything from them. Even once they're involved with you, it doesn't do any harm to show a little interest once in a while.'

'Well, I just didn't ask her, and that's all there is to it.'

'Very well,' said Frederika. 'Don't be cross. I'm trying to be useful.'

'I'm not cross,' said Jonah calmly.

Frederika began to clear the table—Jonah showed no inclination to leave her at once.

'Are you thinking of having your hair cut today?' she asked.

'No. Does it need cutting?'

'I just thought, if you're going to see the girl tonight . . . well, it is a special occasion, isn't it?'

'I looked all right last night. It can't have grown much since then, not in one day.'

'True.'

Jonah got up from the table.

'Can I help you with the washing-up, mother?' he asked.

Frederika looked at him. Without a word she handed him a tea-cloth.

'I know,' he said, 'that the char doesn't come today.'

'You should really have an apron. You mustn't spoil those lovely trousers.'

'Look,' said Jonah, 'if I spoil these trousers, I can always have another pair. I don't have to be careful any more. I don't say Gray is made of trousers exactly, but . . .'

Frederika looked at him, and smiled. He smiled back. He was her son. In this moment of intimacy she felt a longing for the past—the past was no longer her youth and beauty, her triumphs over men, it was a day without end of intimacy with her son, the centre, the support, the pillar of her life.

'I'd better take her to the theatre,' Jonah said. 'I was wondering about the play you saw last night—would it be suitable, do you think?'

A plate fell from Frederika's hand, and smashed on the floor.

'Don't worry mother, you can have a hundred more plates.'

Before she moved, he was already kneeling, picking up the pieces.

'Careful—don't cut yourself,' Frederika heard herself saying, in a neutral voice.

'There are plenty more plates, mother,' said Jonah.

He rose, smiling, with the broken china in his hands.

'Don't just stand there,' she told him. 'Put the pieces in the bin. Funny thing, that's the first plate I've broken here—and it just happens when you offer to help me.'

Jonah laughed.

'I'll tell you something,' said Frederika.

'What?'

'I do think you should get your girl some flowers.'

'That's an idea.'

'You could have them sent—Interflora—you just phone up and they're delivered—no, I think it's better if you take them up to her personally.'

'I don't know if I've got enough money—I forgot to ask Gray this morning.'

'I'll give you some,' said Frederika.

'Oh, can you spare it?'

'Don't worry dear, I'll get some from Gray tonight. I'll have enough for today.'

'Because I can always take a taxi to the shop. I'll get Gray to go to the bank if he hasn't enough with him.'

'It seems silly to go to all that trouble.'

'If you're quite sure . . .'

'I'll get it at once.'

'I won't be going out for a while . . .'

'Let me get it for you now, while it's in my mind.'

And Frederika made for the door.

Jonah finished the drying. Frederika returned with a fistful of pound notes.

'I don't need all that, mother, just for flowers.'

'I didn't even count it—here!'

She thrust the notes into his hand. She watched greedily while he separated them, smoothed them, folded them into his wallet.

'Thanks,' he said. 'I won't get the flowers till this afternoon—they'll be fresher for the evening, when I give them to her. And I don't think I'll get the tickets for the theatre, after all. I'll make sure first that she's free—and if she is, I'll ask her what she would like to do herself. She might not feel like going to the theatre. As you say, I must consider her as well.'

Frederika found herself alone in the early afternoon; she went to the room Jonah shared with Gray. She went through the cupboards and drawers, tidying, and putting aside whatever needed attention. When she reached Jonah's socks and underwear, she remembered him as a child, dependent on her, and she could not help crying a little. She went quickly to her own room, and sat at the dressing-table, repairing her face. Jonah was likely to be back at any moment, with flowers for his girl. As soon as she heard his key in the lock, she went out to greet him.

He was standing with a great bunch of flowers cradled in his arms.

'Do let me see!' she exclaimed. He unpinned the paper concealing them. A mass of golden chrysanthemums lay revealed, like a sun against spikes of gladioli. 'Darling—how beautiful!'

'I didn't know you cared about flowers, mother. I'd have got you some if I'd known.'

She took the flowers from him, resisting the temptation to press them to her bosom. She held them stiffly away from her.

'They'd better go into water, I think. Don't forget to tell her to split the stems. Otherwise they won't take the water properly.'

'You'll be able to wrap them up again?' said Jonah carelessly.

In a vase, they dominated the sitting-room.

'I wonder if it's sensible to let Gray see them,' said Frederika.

'I didn't suggest you bring them in here,' said Jonah.

Frederika said nothing in reply, and the flowers were still there when Gray returned home.

'I won't be eating with you tonight,' Jonah told him after the exchange of greetings.

'He's going out,' Frederika explained.

Gray looked at the flowers.

'I'm taking them upstairs,' said Jonah. 'I may go out to supper with her.'

'Fine,' said Gray, watching Frederika. 'I'll go and change before supper.'

He went to his room, and Jonah went with him to talk while he changed. Frederika wrapped the flowers.

'Oh—do you think it's time for me to go?' Jonah asked when he came back to the sitting-room. Frederika was holding the flowers ready to give him.

'She'll be back by now—bound to be.'

Jonah took the flowers from her.

'Enjoy yourself,' said Gray. 'Have you got enough money?'

'I think so.' said Jonah.

Gray took a five-pound note from his wallet and slipped it into Jonah's pocket.

'Thanks,' said Jonah.

'Yes,' said Frederika. 'Enjoy yourself. Don't forget to look in and say goodnight when you come home. I won't be able to sleep until I know you're back safe.'

'Come,' said Gray, 'he's not a child any more.' He patted Jonah's arm. 'Off with you then.'

Jonah smiled, and let them see him for a moment more, spruce, the flowers cradled in his arms. Then he was gone.

'That reminds me,' said Frederika. 'I had to give Jonah all the money I had . . .'

Jonah slammed the door behind him and ran up the stairs. He knocked shyly on Susan's door.

She took a few minutes opening it. Jonah noticed that her hair was very tidy—it might have just been combed.

'Oh it's you.' she said, brightening, as though nothing could have been more unexpected.

'I've brought you these.' Jonah pushed the flowers into her arms. She tore at the paper.

'Good gracious!' she exclaimed, overwhelmed. 'They're marvellous!' She buried her face in them. 'You shouldn't have!' She was uncertain what to say next. 'Look, do come in.'

She pulled the door open wider. He went in, and she closed the door behind him.

'You must split the stems,' said Jonah. 'Mother told me.'

'Must I? You know, I don't think I've got a vase big enough.'

She darted behind the partition, and came out with an enamel coffee-jug.

'Will this do?'

'It's beautiful.'

She disappeared again, and Jonah heard the tap running.

'I got it at the Portobello Road.'

She went back for a knife.

'Where's that?'

'Don't you know it?' She began to split the stems. 'Notting Hill, on Saturday mornings. You should go.'

'I'd like to.'

'Do they look all right—I'm not much good at arranging flowers.'

She pushed the flowers into the jug, standing back after each one to judge the effect.

'You're very good at it,' said Jonah approvingly. Then he blurted out, in one breath, 'Are you busy tonight? Would you like to have supper with me? We might go to a film or play afterwards if we're in time.'

'Oh dear!' she cried, on the way to the window with the flowers. She stopped short. 'I'd have loved to. But I'm already going out.'

'Oh,' said Jonah, desolate.

'I'm going to a film—with a girl-friend.'

'Of course,' said Jonah.

'If only I'd known earlier. It's too late to do anything about it now.'

'I didn't know where to get in touch with you earlier.'

'What a pity. I work at Harrods. You can always get me there. I'm in the hat department.'

'What a pity!' Jonah echoed her.

'Some other time, maybe?'

Jonah stood about awkwardly.

'I'd better be going,' he said. 'You're in a hurry, I expect.'

'What's the time? Oh dear—I'm terribly sorry, but I have to get a move on.' Jonah was at the door. 'Look, thank you again very much for the flowers. They're gorgeous. You really shouldn't have. You will ask me again, won't you?'

He opened the door, and went out backwards. When he had gone down a few steps he looked back. She was still there, leaning against the door-frame. As he turned, she put a hand through her hair and smiled warmly.

'Don't forget,' she said. 'You must ask me again.' And just as he was about to turn away again, she added, lower 'And thanks again for the flowers.'

She waved gently—he began to raise his hand to wave in return, but she had already gone. He continued down the stairs with heart fluttering.

He could imagine his mother saying, 'Oh yes, dear, gone out with a girl friend?—quite possible, I'm sure—yes, darling, I'm sure she's out with a girl-friend. Don't worry, she said you should ask her again. I don't see why she shouldn't go out with you. Don't look so miserable. There are plenty more girls, after all.'

He went on past Gray's flat, quietly, and out into the street. He kept close to the railing, and hoped his mother was not looking out of the window.

PART FOUR

In Harrods, Leo surveyed his department smugly. At one table, a customer was seated, waiting to have the hat that she had ordered brought to her for a fitting. A second customer approached, was ushered to a table, and a hat she indicated was taken from a stand. The harmony of the department was not too much disturbed by the empty stand.

Frederika came to Harrods, made her way to Leo's department. As she arrived, she saw a door open and Susan emerge carrying a hat: she carried the hat across the floor to a waiting customer. Frederika noticed her figure, with which she could find no fault; but her carriage lacked distinction. She saw a girl who seemed not to take pride in herself.

Leo caught sight of her, and did not at once recognise, in the fashionable, smartly dressed woman, his ancient love. He responded as to a customer. He cringed slightly, and drew himself in, half-bowing. Leo could express deference across the whole width of a department. When he saw his mistake, he recovered himself and went towards her, his bulk under perfect control. He held out both arms to her with cautious enthusiasm.

'Darling,' he said.

She put up a cheek to be touched by his.

'How pompous you've become,' she rebuked him, breathing gently into his ear.

He wriggled, and smiled.

'We're doing awfully well here this season.'

'The arch-conformist!' she breathed, drawing away. She looked him up and down.

'You've not done badly yourself,' he said in reply, 'out of not conforming.' He pressed the lapel of her coat between his fingers. 'Beautiful coat.'

'You like it?' Frederika was delighted. 'It's antelope. I bought it at Woollands—your rivals! I went in there for powder, and what do you think?'—she scintillated a little—'I couldn't resist this dear little coat. I'm so glad you like it.'

Leo started. 'Oh, excuse me,' he said. Susan was at his elbow. Earnest, he withdrew a step or two and listened to her with bent head. He whispered a few words and Susan returned to her customer. 'Excuse me,' he said to Frederika again. 'A customer's being difficult—I'd better see what the trouble is. I won't be a moment.'

'If you're busy, I'll go.'

'Not at all,' he assured her as he went. He leaned over the customer to speak to her. Susan stood watching them.

Soon, Leo returned to Frederika. Susan replaced the hat gingerly on her customer's head.

Frederika nodded towards Susan.

'How are you getting on with her?' she asked.

Susan could not possibly have heard Frederika, but she chose this moment to raise her head. The two women's eyes met. Frederika was the first to look away.

'Not too well,' Leo admitted with a slight laugh.

'Really,' said Frederika, surprised.

'What did you expect?'

'I didn't expect you to have any trouble.'

'Why not?'

'Intuition,' she replied, with hardly a pause.

Leo waited for her to say more. But she remained wise and silent.

'Actually,' he said, 'I've become, believe it or not, a sort of confidant.'

'That's very bad,' Frederika chided him. 'You've dwindled. It depends on what you want, of course.'

'She had an American boy-friend. She began to tell me about him. Then she had trouble with him—'

'Trouble?'

'The usual thing.'

'And you advised her?'

'Not to.'

'You hope to gain her confidence by playing at being father to her?'

'I thought it best for her not to,' said Leo indignantly. 'She happens to be a nice girl. I could tell what sort of boy this American was.'

'Yes?' said Frederika.

'Susan mentioned seeing your son. You live in the same house, don't you?'

'Yes. I've never met the girl personally.'

'Your son asked her out. She was rather sorry she couldn't go.'

'Couldn't go?' Frederika's heart jumped, but her voice was steady.

'She already had arrangements. He's different from the

men she's used to. He's gentle and shy, apparently—I think she rather likes him.'

'She likes him?'

'So you see, my own chances are rather dim at present. I'm becoming really fond of the girl, too.'

Frederika laughed.

'Becoming fond of a girl never helps. Mind you, when a man like you—you know what I mean, an experienced man with an interesting past—when a man like you becomes fond of a girl, it's normally because he's tried other approaches, and failed.'

'You're so worldly,' said Leo crossly.

'I understand that girl—she's restless.' Frederika lowered her voice and spoke more solemnly. 'I should say that she suffers from a craving for luxury.'

She laid her hand on Leo's arm, drawing him into a conspiracy. She watched Susan tend her customer.

'You're not talking about Susan,' said Leo loftily. 'You don't know her. You're just assuming that any woman must be exactly like yourself.'

Frederika found that Leo was not looking at Susan. He was watching her own face intently.

'Whatever do you mean?' Frederika instinctively tried to scintillate again. 'That's deep, isn't it? I don't associate you with profundity.'

'Aren't you simply seeing yourself in this girl? She is not voracious, predatory—she is not what you say she is!'

'Leo!' Frederika drew back from him, and put her hand to her face as though he had struck her. 'Is that what you really think of me? How little you can know me!' She resumed command of herself, slowly and obviously. 'I won't quarrel with you. I'm sure you don't really mean that. It's

just that you're far more involved with the girl than you realise. I could say hurtful things to you, too. But I wouldn't mean them. All those years ago, you really were gentle and shy. You are one of my better memories.'

'I shouldn't have spoken like that,' said Leo.

Frederika shook her head slowly, and hoped that the wisdom of ages was in her face.

'I was no different from any girl. This girl is just an ordinary girl too. If you knew more about women, if you weren't such an incurable romantic still, you wouldn't be shocked by what I said. It's not such a terrible accusation.'

'I still don't agree with you.'

'If the world, Leo, were what you would have it, it would be an awfully dull place.'

'I'm sorry we got onto this unpleasant subject.'

'You're moved, Leo—by this girl, more than you know, and by me too, just a little. I'll just say one more thing—and then I won't refer to the subject again. Leo, why don't you help the girl? Give her what she needs. Set her up properly—in a decent flat. Make her give up work. I tell you, she has every inclination towards idleness and luxury—and don't ask me how I know this. I just know. If you thought about it clearly, you'd realise what an unsatisfactory life she is leading. Give her what she really wants, and see how grateful she will be!'

'I still think,' said Leo uneasily, 'that you are talking about yourself. The girl may not be like this at all.'

'That's quite enough of seriousness,' said Frederika brightly. 'I'm not going to run your life for you. In the end you'll do exactly what you want, so why should I waste words on you? Are you going to take me to coffee? No,' she rejoined at once, very sensitive, 'I can see you're

far too busy. I'm sure I've taken up too much of your time already. I was just passing through. By the way, I nearly forgot—I thought how lovely it would be if you came to supper with me one evening. I'd like you to meet my son. And Gray—that's our friend. He's in antiques.'

'I'd love to,' Leo answered.

'We won't fix a date now.' Frederika was all tact. 'I can see you're harassed.'

'No I'm not,' said Leo truthfully. But Frederika ignored his interruption. She was too busy preparing her exit.

'I'll be off,' she mouthed, as though any further noise would drive Leo distracted. 'Lovely to see you again. Look after yourself.' She nodded towards Susan. 'Be good to the girl—but not too good.' Leo did not try to work out what she meant. She adjusted her antelope coat, smoothed it over her hips while she looked up at him as though there were much she had left unsaid, and turned away. 'I'll phone you,' were her last words—and with a flurry she was gone.

Leo surveyed his department. One customer had bought—the hats she had tried on were being replaced on stands. Susan had disposed of the other satisfactorily. Everything was harmonious.

He looked at Susan with new interest. It didn't do, especially at his age, and with his experience, to be too sentimental about young girls.

Jonah strolled with Susan through the city. The city was not so strange to Jonah—with Susan at his side, he seemed to belong to the concourse of people. They walked slowly. Susan was wearing a long-sleeved dress. The newly pressed, immaculate cuffs were held together by large, chunky cuff-links. He liked being with her.

They went together to St James's Park. They tried to recognise in the birds on the lake the different varieties shown in the line of framed pictures along the bank. They sat on the grass. The sun shone.

Jonah thought of the city at his back. It was a city in a sea of green, there was green all round the city, green was the enemy of the city which covered it: there was green under the pavements, and here in the park, there was green pushing up in the very centre of the city. The city was a veneer, no more—strip away the city, and the singing, vibrant earth was everywhere unchanged.

They went down to the river. The river was broad, serene. It might one day rise and cover the land. London, and all its buildings, and all its people, would be swept away, and yet the world would be no different. The world was the grass and the river. In good time, Jonah wanted his share of the world. Afterwards, he didn't care what happened.

They went on a river bus. It was Susan's idea. From the water, they looked at the skyline of London. Glass, and steel, and all the different stones, became one material, creating the panorama which slid slowly past them as they sat watching.

On the boat, they heard the noise of water as they pressed through it. The noise of London was in the distance, unheard.

'Are you enjoying yourself?' Jonah asked Susan.

'Yes,' she answered. She nodded vigorously. 'Everything looks so beautiful. I'm falling in love with London for the first time. I haven't been happy in London. When I first came, I thought everything would be marvellous. But I've been terribly disappointed. I shouldn't be working at Harrods. It just happened. I was brought up in India, you know. My father was in the civil service there. Being a white girl in

India led me to expect great things from life. I thought I was special. It was so strange at first in England, finding everybody white. I didn't have status any more.'

'Is your father still alive?'

'No. That's why I've become a salesgirl. My father died quite suddenly. I hadn't been trained for anything. I was sent here to school, so when he died, I thought I'd come back. I never really liked India.'

'And you don't like London?'

'Things seem to have gone wrong. I hate everybody I meet. It's no good being a girl.'

'I thought it would be easy for a girl to have a good time—a girl living on her own, like you, with no responsibilities.'

'I get lonely,' said Susan, not looking at him. 'I have to wait for men to ask me out. I don't like going out alone, and it's not fun going out with a girl-friend. I hate having to rely on men like this.'

'I suppose all girls have the same difficulties. Don't other girls manage?'

'Most girls have their problems.'

'Perhaps they do. I've really not thought about it.'

'I get lonely. I seem to spend all my time sitting about doing nothing. Waiting, and for what? And yet I haven't got a minute to myself. I have to rush to get to work in time, I have to look after my flat and my clothes. Doing a job and having no money is not much of a life. I don't read any more. I don't seem to have time to do anything I want to do. Yet I'm not doing anything. I'm just waiting.'

'You know,' said Jonah, 'I feel just like that myself. I feel I'm waiting.'

He put his arm round her shoulder, and she leaned against his chest shyly.

They came to the docks, and the sky was full of cranes.

'Through the years,' said Susan, 'thousands upon thousands of immigrants have come down this river, and looked out at the strange city, and wondered what sort of life awaited them.'

'Did you come past the docks too?'

'Yes—but I was sure everything was going to be fine. I didn't think of myself as an immigrant. I regarded England as my own country. I expected to step out onto dry land and take over. I was very naïve.'

'I'm sure things will go better from now on,' said Jonah.

Jonah and Susan strolled together through the zoo.

Jonah was restless among the caged animals.

'It doesn't seem natural,' he said. 'It's so strange, seeing these creatures out of their element. Wild animals shouldn't be put in cages.'

They had been holding hands. Susan disengaged hers.

'Don't be ridiculous. How else can you keep them? Do you want them walking about? If they're not going to be in cages, we won't be able to come and look at them at all.'

'Just the same,' said Jonah stubbornly. 'I think it's wrong.'

'Then we shouldn't have come here—there will always be zoos so long as people are willing to pay money to see them.'

'In that case I'm sorry we came.'

Susan stopped deliberately before a cage. She studied Jonah's mood, half-wanting to aggravate his restlessness.

'You're very considerate of wild animals,' she said. 'I'm sorry to tell you this—but it's too easy, being concerned about wild animals. It's more important for you to care

about people. You never seem to worry about what I want. We've been walking around, and we stop, and then go on, just when you want to. What about what I want?'

'It's not important, is it? I didn't even notice. You only had to say . . .'

They looked at each other. Jonah seemed very helpless.

'I do want to please you, Susan. You're the first person I've ever really wanted to please.'

Susan relaxed.

'The funny thing is, I believe you. But it puts me in such a difficult position. I put up with much more from you than I would from anyone else'—Jonah looked at her in surprise, and she blushed slightly—'yes—I do—and I still feel you're trying to behave as well as you can.' They walked on in silence. She turned to him again. 'You know the whole trouble—I've told you before—you should do some kind of work.'

'I will, I will,' Jonah protested feebly.

'And there's something else. I haven't said this before. It's time you left your mother.' Jonah did not reply. 'I know what you'll tell me,' Susan continued quickly, 'your mother is alone in the world, she needs you, and one day you'll get married and then you'll leave her.'

Jonah looked at her unhappily.

'I don't know what I can answer. It's so difficult to explain.'

'All right. Try to explain.'

'I want to be honest with you. I don't want to hold back—but I can't begin to tell you, it's all so complicated. We haven't had an ordinary life together . . .'

Susan waited for him to go on. But he changed the subject.

'Let's go inside somewhere, shall we? What about the Lion House?'

Susan sighed.

'Can't we see them just as well outside? In this weather they're all outside anyway. It's so stuffy inside.'

'What about the Aquarium?' Jonah pleaded with her.
'It's cool in the Aquarium. I love the underwater.'

'Whatever you want—as usual,' said Susan. 'Yes, it is cool there.' Jonah looked hurt. 'Yes, I do want to go into the Aquarium—in fact, I'd love to.' Jonah still did not move. 'Come along,' she said, half-smiling. 'I'm really very keen to look at fish. Or have you changed your mind again?' She shook her head. 'You are a difficult case. I don't know why I put up with you.'

'You're sure you really want to?' Jonah persisted.

'Oh do come on!'

Jonah relaxed as soon as they stepped into the welcoming gloom. The only light came from the illuminated tanks.

Susan started out alone, and Jonah reached for her hand. He gripped her arm just above the wrist. His thumb and first finger circled the yielding flesh.

'I'm sorry,' he whispered. 'Sorry to be so difficult. I am trying—you know that. But I like being with you. I can talk to you.'

'I think you mean what you say.' Jonah was sorry he could not see Susan's face clearly. 'But I'm never sure with you. You're so evasive. The more you talk, the less I feel I know you.'

'As long as you're not bored with me,' said Jonah earnestly.

'I can't put it down on paper for you—in black and white! You'll have to decide for yourself whether I am or not. I've

never met anyone so unsure of himself. Half the time I don't think you care about anything. And the other half I feel I've got power of life and death over you. You'll have to grow up, Jonah!'

They stood in front of a tank. Large, cold-water fish swirled slowly to and fro.

'What a boring life they have,' said Susan. 'I wonder what keeps them going at all.'

The tanks were bare, with lumps of rock, to which threads of algae clung. Apart from these few wisps, there was no green. The fish were colourless, with coarse-textured scales.

'But it's all so mysterious,' said Jonah. 'It's a silent world. It has its own rhythm. Just a pane of glass between us.' He pressed his hands to the glass. One of the fish approached, and brushed the glass where his hand pressed it. 'This glass contains a whole world.'

'I prefer the tropical fish,' said Susan. 'Cold-water fish are so English, somehow. You're a cold fish too, Jonah.'

The second hall had mostly smaller tanks in it, with a multitude of tiny, brightly coloured fish in them.

'This is better!' Susan cried. 'It's lovely. I'm glad we came, after all.'

She grasped Jonah's hand firmly, and led him along. She bent to read the names of the fish as they moved from tank to tank.

The tanks were brilliant with green—long flat blades, pale sword-shaped leaves, and delicate ferns. The fish darting through the green were miniature banners of red and yellow and silver. As Susan looked in eagerly, her face, lit by the light from the tanks, was transfigured—her hair glowed. Jonah watched her, and was moved by her youth, by her vitality and enthusiasm. She was an image of what he craved

in life. She breathed through parted lips. From time to time she looked up at him, and he smiled, trying to show her that his own enthusiasm matched hers. He put his arm round her, and she leaned against him. He wondered if the energy pulsing through her body would enter his.

The aquarium was a grotto, cool, mysterious. Susan was the presiding spirit. She and he, side by side, moved together between the world apart of the brightly-lit water.

At the end of the hall, they came to a separate group of tanks. Here no fish darted about—instead, they saw spread before them a strange sea-scape of living plants.

'Oh, do let's stop and look!' Jonah cried, pulling at her arm. 'It's marvellous!' He was entranced. 'It's a waste-land, a moon-scape!'

'They're awful,' Susan exclaimed impulsively. For a moment she was chilled.

Jonah was deeply disappointed.

'I think they're beautiful.'

They were close to the water, and Susan saw his face clearly. Jonah looked at her upturned face. He had a clear sense of the two of them as a silhouette cut out against the water. He felt that he was obliged to bend and kiss her face. But he looked past her, on to the steel plates with names engraved on them at the base of the tanks.

'Yes,' said Susan more calmly. 'I suppose they have something. When you get used to them. Yes, they're even beautiful in a way.'

Together they read out the names.

'Purple-Tipped Sea-Urchin—Cotton Spinner—aren't they wonderful names?' said Jonah. 'Vestlet Anemone, Beadlet Anemone. . . .'

'Yes,' said Susan.

She waited patiently while he roamed the tanks. When he was ready to leave at last, she took his arm protectively: they had to separate to go through the turnstiles out of the aquarium into the sun.

They blinked at the light.

'You know something?' said Susan, as they strolled on, breaking a silence.

'What?' asked Jonah, still separated from her by the silence.

'I shouldn't say this really.'

'Come on,' said Jonah, squeezing her hand mechanically. Susan sensed his indifference. His thoughts were not with her, in the sun-filled present.

'I'm frightened for you,' she said simply.

'For me?'

'Yes,' she insisted, ready to flare up. 'You're so—so removed, so lonely. You're in love with dead things.'

'Am I?' Jonah was chilled.

'Yes, you are.' She stopped walking. He went on a pace before he noticed. 'You're removed, and lonely, and you're hardly aware of it, and that's why I'm frightened for you.'

He took her hand, and drew her closer. He had been aware of them, in the aquarium, as a couple, and now again, in the sunlight, he had an idea how they must appear to the people about them, as a couple, two handsome young people together, part of the daylight world.

'Come,' he said soothingly. 'We've been out a long time. We should be going home now.'

'All right.'

'Shall we do something together this evening—a theatre, perhaps, or a film?'

'I'm sorry I said anything, really.' Susan frowned, and made him stop, so that he should see how worried she was.
'I may have spoiled the afternoon. I may have spoiled something more—whatever there is between us.'

'Of course you haven't,' he assured her.

'I mean it,' she insisted. 'I want to know.' She spoke clearly, emphatically. 'You see, you've got to say what you think, even if it's difficult. Just sometimes, anyway. It's no good being polite, saying what you think people want to hear—avoiding scenes. Otherwise,' she ended evasively, 'you simply never get anywhere.'

'It's been a wonderful afternoon. That's what is really in my mind, and I'm saying it. Does that make you happy?'

'I don't know whether you mean it. I feel you're just not with me any more. The connection is broken.'

'You'll come tonight?'

'Yes.'

Susan took his arm again.

'I think we'll go home first,' Jonah told her. 'We can change. And I want to see mother. She'll know what film or play we should see.'

'All right,' said Susan.

'Gray,' said Frederika.

She threw on to the table a telephone bill, and two other bills.

Gray was in an armchair, his hands folded on his stomach. His eyes were closed.

'What is it?' He sat upright, blinking. 'I wasn't asleep,' he protested.

Frederika pointed to the bills.

'They have to be paid,' she said.

He sighed deeply and rose stiffly to his feet, still half-asleep. He picked up the bills and unfolded them.

'I feel so tired nowadays,' he said. He glanced at the bills, and replaced them on the table. 'I don't know what's come over me. I don't go out much now. We should go out more.' He glanced at himself in the mirror. There was ash on his lapel. 'My suit could do with a good brush,' he said irritably.

'It's no good ignoring the bills,' said Frederika, studying his face. 'They've got to be paid. Will you pay them, or do you want to give me the money, and I'll pay them for you? It's up to you.'

Gray put the bills into his pocket.

'I'll see to them,' he said.

He returned listlessly to his arm-chair.

'What's the matter with you?' Frederika asked crossly. 'Are you sorry now for what you've done—for giving Jonah this freedom? I warned you.'

Gray shrugged.

'You did warn me. So you are not to blame for anything. But what could I do?'

'You could have been more of a man.'

'Maybe,' said Gray, without surprise, without resentment.

'You must fight back! Fight me—fight someone—do *something*!'

'I'll pay these bills, don't worry.'

'I do worry. I can't be without a telephone. And those other bills, my personal bills, I shall be very embarrassed if they're not attended to. I've got my reputation to think of.'

Gray's hands fluttered—he wanted peace.

'All right.'

'Are we spending too much money?' Frederika asked him. She was standing over him. He looked up nervously. 'You

have to tell us if we are spending too much money. Have you any money left ?'

'Yes,' Gray sighed. 'Don't worry—don't worry. Things will be all right.'

'Are you doing well in the shop?' Frederika asked suspiciously.

'Yes,' Gray protested. 'I'm doing very well.'

'You don't expect me to believe that. You've taken too much on yourself and you're bound to suffer for it. On the morning of creation, why, even God must have been appalled at what He had undertaken. "Let there be light!" indeed. What over-confidence! You played God to my son. That was a mistake too. You must regret it now.'

'No,' said Gray.

'Let me tell you this, Gray. You had confidence that morning because you had money—when you no longer have money, you have nothing.'

'I know,' he said, 'what situation I find myself in, in my old age.'

'It is a situation of your own creating,' said Frederika.

Gray rose to his feet again.

'I'm going out,' he said.

'And where, may I ask, have you to go to?'

'Out into the world,' he said waving his hand towards the window, through which could be seen the trees in the crescent, shaking their branches. 'Out into the world, out into my grave.'

They faced each other. Gray nodded his head slowly, and on his lips was a self-conscious smile, expressing at once self-pity and a secret understanding.

Frederika was irritated. When he left the room, she said aloud, 'Oh yes, very fine, very melodramatic,' and she

listened to Gray's slow step in the corridor, and heard the front door open and close softly behind him. She was relieved to be in the flat alone, and went to her bedroom.

'I must take stock of myself in the world,' she said to herself, looking reflectively around her. She opened her wardrobe, and ran her hand along the line of sleeves. Leaving the wardrobe open, she went to the drawers, in which her clothes were neatly arrayed. She sat at the dressing-table, and watched herself as she unlocked the last drawer of all. She took out her jewel-case, and put it on her right, beside her brushes with their mother-of-pearl handles. To her left, near her bottles of perfume, she put a small pile of documents, secured with an elastic band.

'My jewels,' she said, running them through her fingers. 'All out of pawn, every one. But not a single new piece to speak for my residence here.'

She took the band off the documents. She flicked them laughingly against the edge of the dressing-table.

'Property,' she said, 'no longer needed as security for an overdraft at the bank. They're safer here with me than they are in the vaults of the bank! I'll not let them out of my care again, if I can help it.' Tenderly, she separated three pieces from the rest. 'My shares—my stocks and shares, my bonds. I have something, at least, here, to speak for the months with Gray.' She threw them all on to the table. 'So this is all—this is Frederika in the world!'

She looked at her reflection.

She was no longer young. But she clung to life. Gray would soon have no money left, and they would have to go. She might lose Jonah, and then she would have nothing. Her clothes, her pathetic few pieces of jewellery, her property, as she called it, and her few stocks and shares. Beyond that,

she had only herself. Only this to protect her, if she lose Jonah, against old age and want.

She heard someone come into the flat. Quickly she put away the papers and jewel-case, and locked the drawer. She closed, almost guiltily, as though they revealed her thoughts, the other drawers and the wardrobe.

It was Jonah. Susan had gone straight up to her own flat.
‘Mother,’ he called.

‘Yes.’ She emerged and went back to the sitting-room.

‘Oh, there you are. How are you?’

‘Fine.’

‘Not tired?’

‘No.’ She scanned his face, and tried to guess whether he had enjoyed his afternoon. ‘Should I be?’

‘We went to the zoo.’

‘How ghastly—it’s stifling in this weather. And on a Saturday afternoon of all times! Just when the workers are unleashed—I don’t know why you had to choose a Saturday!’

‘Susan works in the week.’

‘Oh, yes, of course she does.’

Frederika idled about the room, and decided to change the subject.

‘You’re very uneasy today,’ Jonah observed. ‘Is anything worrying you?’

‘I’ve someone coming to supper tomorrow,’ she said, ignoring his attack. ‘An old friend. I’d like him to meet you.’

‘I’m going out with Susan tomorrow,’ said Jonah quickly.

‘Really,’ said Frederika, letting her temper rise for an instant. ‘Can’t you see her another night?’

‘Yes, I’m seeing her tonight as well.’

‘I won’t try to influence you,’ said Frederika. She was dismayed to hear ice in her voice. ‘After all,’ she added,

attempting a more neutral tone, 'you're grown up now.'

Jonah went to change. Frederika rapped her temples, trying to drive into her head the idea of patience.

'Oh, mother,' Jonah called out.

'Yes?'

He began to button his shirt slowly.

'I really ought to bring Susan in to meet you.'

'I don't want that.'

'No?' Jonah did not raise his voice.

'It's up to Gray,' said Frederika. 'He's keeping you, after all. He's been good enough to let you go out with this girl, but that doesn't mean to say he wants her in his home.'

'You wouldn't mind meeting her?' Jonah persisted, mildly.

'I don't want to have anything to do with her,' said Frederika, waving aside the whole subject of Susan.

'I see,' said Jonah, tucking his shirt in.

He went out of the room silently. Before he left, he did not see his mother again. Frederika only knew that he was gone when she heard the front door slam behind him.

The noise of the door slamming reverberated in her ears. Soon there was peace again in the flat—but she remained alert. Everywhere now, even in the recesses of the empty flat, she smelled danger.

She started when soon she heard a key inserted in the lock of the front door. People came down the corridor towards her. Before they reached her, thinking it better to welcome danger than to shrink from it, she went out to meet them.

Jonah stopped when he saw her. Beside him was a girl.

'What a pleasant surprise,' she said to the girl. 'How nice of Jonah to bring you. He's talked so much about you.'

She led her into the sitting-room, where there was more

light. Susan was her rival for Jonah, and she concentrated all her attention on her. She would wrest Jonah from the grasp of Susan, and of all the world.

'I'll get you a drink,' she said pleasantly.

Pouring drinks was a momentary focus for her energies. She gave Susan a drink, and took one herself, forgetting Jonah.

Susan had sat down on Frederika's own velvet chair: she crossed her legs. They were bare to the knee and well-shaped.

'Lovely flat,' Susan said, looking round admiringly.

Frederika considered that she had, herself, been far more attractive at Susan's age. Susan lacked sparkle, sadly lacked artifice. In her own youth, Frederika recalled, men would not have tolerated such an insipid girl. Men had no use then for a girl who was simply modest and unaffected—spirit and dash were thought far more inviting.

'This dowdy little creature!' said Frederika to herself. 'Making herself comfortable on my chair! Let a son of mine select an orchid—then I would be afraid. But not of this common flower from the hedgerows!'

Susan sipped her drink.

'How do you like living here?' she asked.

'She has perfect skin,' thought Frederika. 'Mine is so wrinkled. It's unbearable. I can't look at my own body any more. Hers is plump and delightful. But I at her age! Youth is far too good for her!'

'I'd love to see more of the flat.' Susan looked questioningly at Jonah.

'Would you, dear,' said Frederika quickly. 'I'd be pleased to show you.'

Susan rose to her feet, smiling, appreciative.

'Pour yourself another drink,' Frederika told Jonah.

Jonah rose too, and was about to follow them. But he thought better of it. He smiled at his mother, and sauntered to the table and picked up a bottle. He poured himself a drink, as Frederika led Susan from the room and straight to her bedroom. The drawers were closed now, and the wardrobe. Frederika thought of her slight resources, and looked at Susan. She determined that she would not be condemned, through this girl, or any other girl, to penury, and to loneliness out of Jonah's sight.

'Why, it's delightful,' cried Susan. 'I don't think I've ever seen such a lovely room!'

'Do you like it?' said Frederika, gratified, and matching the girl's own artlessness.

'Simply lovely!'

Susan touched the pink *negligée* hanging behind the door. She took her hand away quickly, as though she had transgressed.

'Try it on, do!' said Frederika generously.

She took it down off its hook.

'I've always wanted something like this,' Susan confided. She stroked the maribou cuffs.

Frederika led her to the dressing-table, and obligingly tilted the mirror. Susan smoothed the *negligée* over her bust, and arranged the sleeves. She swung round, and admired her profile, bending back from the waist. Frederika swooped to the floor, and rose with a pair of satin mules in her hands.

'Try these,' she invited Susan.

'May I?'

Susan's eye ranged the dressing-table.

'What a coincidence!' said Frederika. 'I buy my perfumes at Harrods. Do you recognise this?' She held up a

bottle. 'Joy—by Jean Patou. I love it.' She gave Susan the bottle to hold.

'Why don't you try some?' She pulled out the stool, and eased the girl into it. 'Is that right?' she asked, re-angling the mirror.

Susan was moved by her image in the mirror—she seemed to fall in love with herself in a gilt frame. She watched herself as she unscrewed the top of the perfume bottle.

'Perfume is one of the few things,' said Frederika benignly, 'that I can still be sentimental about.'

Susan dabbed herself with growing assurance.

'We must go back,' said Frederika, choosing the moment carefully. 'Men don't like to be kept waiting, do they?'

Susan allowed Frederika to divest her of the pink *negligée*. Regretfully she stepped out of the mules. By the time they had reached the sitting-room, except for the perfume which still clung to her, she was the same Susan once more.

'It's a beautiful flat,' she exclaimed.

'Come,' said Frederika, with a laugh, 'you hardly saw it. You must persuade Jonah to bring you again.'

'Did you like mother?' Jonah asked Susan as soon as they were outside.

'I was awfully nervous. I hope I behaved properly. She seems very nice. Did you ask her about a play to see?'

'I forgot. Never mind. Shall we just go somewhere to eat?'

They spent the evening in a restaurant with check table-cloths; it was Susan's choice. On the table between them a candle flickered.

'You seem more relaxed,' said Jonah, 'than I've ever seen you before.'

'Do I?' She smiled. 'I feel rather happy tonight. I don't

know why. I wonder if the drink had an effect on me. I've really got no head for drink, you know. Do you like it here? It's romantic, isn't it?'

'Yes.'

'I'm glad you like it.'

'Have you been here often before?'

'No.' She studied him. 'You're a strange boy,' she said shyly. 'I can't quite make you out. I don't really know anything about you. I don't know what you like. Dancing, maybe?' Jonah shook his head. 'You see, I've simply no idea. You seem rather out of things.' Jonah said nothing, so she went on talking. 'At least you're different from most people I've met about London. That means a lot to me.'

'I like you, Susan,' said Jonah, laying his hand on hers.

'I like you too,' said Susan, after consideration. She smiled, and looked down at their two hands. 'You needn't be so shy, you know.'

They returned home late. Jonah looked up, and saw that the lights were on in Gray's flat. He remembered how once he had looked down from a window and seen Susan being kissed by a young man. They were now together on the very spot.

Once, it had scarcely seemed possible that it might be his turn, one day, to be there himself with the girl. He had only to reach out and take her in his arms. He could even kiss her if he wanted to. He looked up again. There was no one at the window now.

Susan was standing, waiting. He put his arms round her. She did not resist. He was overcome with shyness. He kissed her, and was seized by confusion. He hoped, with the kiss, to

quell the great wind, that the waters rising about him would subside. And he looked up, half-expecting to see his mother at the window, raging.

Susan leaned against him. Nothing happened. She moved away, out of his arms, looking up at him.

'Thank you,' she said, 'for a lovely evening.'

She was the same, he was the same.

She ran quickly up the steps. He walked up behind her and unlocked the door for her.

'See you tomorrow?' he asked.

'Yes,' she whispered.

'I'm looking forward,' he said awkwardly. 'I always look forward to seeing you.'

'Good night.'

'Good night.'

She smiled and left him a picture of herself. Then she went up the staircase. Jonah waited a few minutes, alone in the dark hallway, thinking. Then he made his way up the staircase himself.

Frederika was alone in the sitting-room. A novel was open on her lap.

'Still up?' he said.

'Yes, darling. Is it late, then? I was lost in my book. It's interesting.' She held it up for him to see.

To his surprise, she too was the same.

'Gray has gone to bed?' he asked.

'Yes,' she said.

'I'll be going to bed myself then.'

'Goodnight, dear.'

She tilted her head very slightly. He went to her, and bent to kiss her cheek.

'You had a nice evening, dear?'

'Yes, mother.' Jonah suspected a hidden meaning. 'Very nice.'

'Good,' she said, smooth as cream.

Gray was sitting on the bed. He had taken off his jacket and tie.

'Were you waiting up for me?' Jonah asked, beginning to undress.

'No,' said Gray. 'I was just waiting.'

'What for?'

'For nothing. Just waiting.'

Gray had not looked up. Jonah shrugged, and went on undressing.

'You're not much of a talker,' he said casually.

'Not any more,' said Gray.

'Anything I've done?'

Gray got up. He staggered, and righted himself. He went to the mirror.

'I'm trying to see myself as other people must see me—as you see me. What am I now? I'm a tired old man. I've no self-respect any more. Come here.' He held out his hand. Jonah went to stand by him. 'I live beside you and don't know you. I sleep with a stranger. Your thoughts, your feelings, your life are hidden from me. That is no way for me to live. Yet this is the life I have accepted.'

'I am a gentle man. But my virtues are not of a kind that are admired. I do not respect myself.'

Jonah moved away.

'You're upset about something,' he said. 'I hope you're a bit more cheerful in the morning.'

Gray turned to him, in despair.

'You've touched something deep in me, Jonah. There'll not be anyone else in my life.'

'I'm glad—but do you mind if I get some sleep now—I'm tired too.'

Gray stood before the mirror while Jonah finished undressing and got into bed. Gray turned the light out, and sat down on the bed, watching the boy's features, which he could make out dimly in the faint light, and listening, after he slept, to his regular breathing.

Frederika prepared carefully for Leo's visit. She shopped at Fortnum's for food. She chose from her wardrobe the best of what was suitable for her to wear. When Leo arrived, she was delighted to see him.

'Lovely to see you,' she gushed. 'Did you find us easily? We live in a backwater, I'm afraid.'

They kissed gently, fondly—they drew back slowly, not hurting each other—they were full of nostalgia for the past.

'If we were meeting for the first time,' said Frederika, 'I wonder what we would think of each other. I wonder what would happen.'

'I can't imagine,' said Leo gallantly, 'not having known you all my life.'

Frederika led him deeper into the flat, only afraid now that Gray, in his present mood, would react badly to a visitor.

Gray, on the contrary, seemed delighted to meet someone new. Their life together was tedious, and he welcomed an interruption. He got up, unbending his long body, and was slightly amused to see how different they were, he and Frederika's friend, in build and type.

'This,' said Frederika, clinging to Leo, 'is an old, old friend.'

Gray smiled maliciously.

'Do you find her changed?' he asked Leo. 'People's lives

grow apart, you know, people change as their lives change. I'm sure I've changed myself over the years. Why, I'm changing very much even now.'

'Pleased to meet you,' said Leo, with reserve. He looked round the room; he looked questioningly at Frederika.

Gray straightened his tie, and with composure offered Leo a seat, before sitting down himself. Frederika poured drinks.

'Is your son here?' Leo asked. 'I was hoping to meet him.'

'I regret,' said Frederika, 'he already had an engagement.'

'Oh, I'm sorry. Never mind—perhaps another time.'

Before they ate, Leo went to the bathroom.

'What do you think of him?' Frederika asked Gray when they were alone.

'Charming,' said Gray.

'I'm so relieved. I thought you might find him a bore.'

'He's so delightfully masculine,' said Gray, 'he seems almost out of date.'

The meal was excellent. From the end of the table Frederika watched the two men benignly as they ate.

'You're at Harrods!' exclaimed Gray. 'How delightful! I'm just round the corner. Beauchamp Place. You must come and see me.' He tapped the back of Leo's hand flirtatiously across the table. Leo withdrew his hand.

At the end of the meal, Frederika left the men alone in the sitting-room, and went to make coffee. She returned, after a while, with the small cups steaming on a tray, to find them at a distance from each other, Leo in a stiff attitude at the mantelpiece, and Gray in an armchair with his knees together.

'And how are you boys getting along together?' she asked, with a bright smile.

Time passed. Conversation flagged. Frederika seemed unaware.

'I'm so glad you two met,' she said. 'Would you like to see the rest of the flat, Leo?'

Leo accepted her offer eagerly.

As soon as they were outside the sitting-room, alone, Leo took Frederika's arm.

'I don't understand the set-up here,' he said gravely.

'What do you mean?'

'I'm fond of you.' Leo spoke with reluctance. 'Otherwise I wouldn't say anything. But I can't see you with this man Gray. You just don't seem to go together.'

'Why not?'

'To tell the truth—he seems to me an out and out pansy! I felt quite uncomfortable with him.'

'Was it something he said?'

'He didn't actually say anything wrong.'

'Perhaps it was the way he looked,' said Frederika.

'I suppose it was that more than anything.'

'I'm sure you imagined it,' said Frederika, patting his arm reassuringly.

Leo shook his head, unconvinced. They began their tour of the flat. Frederika showed him first the kitchen, then her own room.

'I like this,' said Leo advancing, 'I feel more at home here. It's more like an ordinary room.'

Frederika led him next to Gray's room. Leo glanced round it.

'And where does your son sleep?' he asked. Frederika did not reply. 'Doesn't he live with you?'

'Yes,' said Frederika.

Leo looked round the room again. Then he looked at Frederika. His mind cleared.

'You're joking,' he said incredulously. 'It can't be true.'

Frederika raised her head.

'It is true,' she said. 'You're too quick for me. I didn't want you to know. Gray is my son's lover. I'm just Jonah's mother. I thought you'd be upset. That's why I didn't want you to know.'

'Upset!' Leo sank down on the bed. 'It's . . . I had no idea. I don't know what to think.'

Frederika sat down beside him.

'I know what you're thinking. You're thinking that I've come down in the world—that I've sunk very low.'

'I knew there was something wrong with that man the minute I set eyes on him. It's dreadful. It's dreadful for your son.' He looked at Frederika sadly. 'It's worst of all for you. When I think what you once were . . .'

'I was penniless. I've grown old. It hurt me very much. But I've had to get used to it.'

'How can you get used to it? I'm not narrow-minded—but even I . . . and I'm not involved. It's your own son!' A new thought struck Leo. 'Your son—where is he tonight?'

'I don't know.'

Leo saw that Frederika was confused.

'Is he with Susan—she told me that he'd asked her to go out with him?'

'I don't know.'

'I think he's with Susan.'

'He may be.' Frederika took Leo's hands in hers. 'Don't judge me too harshly.'

'I don't judge you at all,' said Leo. 'I'm sorry for you. I mean that. If you accept this situation, all I can say is, you must have been desperate.' He drew back from her, gently, and got up. 'But your son mustn't go on seeing Susan. You understand that, don't you? I feel for the girl. She'll be hurt

and humiliated. All this is so sordid—I'm not going to let her be drawn in. You can't blame me.'

'I suppose not,' said Frederika. 'But what can I do—it's all too much for me. It could be such a wonderful thing for my son.'

'I know that—but I'm thinking of the girl. She's unspoilt. There's a horrible atmosphere in this flat.'

'You exaggerate, surely.'

'No; I noticed it as soon as I set foot in it. You've got used to it, you don't realise. I must tell Susan—it's only right. But no good can come of this.'

'Are you sure, Leo, that you're not just taking advantage of the situation to improve your standing with her? Is that why you're so shocked?'

'It isn't that. I'm considering her good—it's my duty to tell her. I'm sorry, but I must do everything in my power to stop her seeing your son.' He looked at Frederika uneasily. 'And now I must go. I don't feel comfortable here. I'd rather leave at once, without seeing Gray. Do you mind?'

Frederika sighed.

'No, I don't mind. You must do what you think right.' She led him to the front-door and held it open for him. 'Only don't think too badly of us. Put yourself in my place. Don't judge me too harshly.'

Leo passed her, and stood uncertainly outside. Then he turned and went, without a word.

Slowly, Frederika closed the door on him and returned to Gray.

Jonah and Susan, in Susan's flat, were side by side on the sofa. Susan snuggled up to him.

'I want to say thank you,' she said.

He pulled the hem of her blouse free of her skirt, and put his hand on her bare back. She waited for him to undo the buttons, and slipped it off. She shook her head so that the pearls in her ears swung a little. He unhooked her brassiere.

Jonah was amazed at the softness of her flesh. Her breasts were playful, inessential.

'Have you had many girls?' she asked him.

'None.'

She nodded thoughtfully. She waited for him to ask her.

'And you—have you known many men?'

He was not bursting with interest, but she made allowances—he was young and shy.

'When I was seventeen,' she said, 'I was in love with a married man. We were crazy about each other.' She paused, and waited for his hand to move a little. 'After eighteen months he still hadn't left his wife.'

'No,' said Jonah lazily.

He settled back, and his head lolled on her shoulder. She tilted her head so that her hair fell over his face—with her finger she traced the line of his lips.

'Lovely hard lips,' she said.

'They're not,' said Jonah.

'After that, would you believe it, there was nothing for a year. More than a year. . . .'

Jonah listened to her voice, not to her words. Her voice covered him like a veil. He rested his cheek on her breasts, not heavily.

Susan talked of more men. Hearing of men in her life did not rouse him. His hand lay idly on her lap—he put his hand between her knees. She pressed them together, imprisoning his hand. His hand quivered. She pressed her teeth together, and hissed between them softly. He lifted his head and

smiled. He looked intently at her lips, and kissed them gently, slowly.

She brushed his hand away.

'What are you thinking of?' she asked.

'Nothing,' he said.

'Darling—I'm not oblivious, you know. You must be thinking of something.'

He looked into her eyes.

'I'm thinking of mother,' he said.

'Your mother,' Susan repeated. She drew away from him.

'If you're thinking of your mother, perhaps it would be better if you went to her. It's not good your being with me if you're not thinking of me, is it?' She put her two hands on his chest, and pushed him away from her. She felt beside her for her clothes. Jonah watched her, then went to the mirror to comb his hair while she dressed.

'You're very strange, all of a sudden,' he said. 'I am thinking of you too, of course. Would you prefer me not to tell you the truth? You said yourself that there are times when we have to tell the truth.'

'I'm terribly tired,' said Susan.

'Everybody I'm with gets tired.'

'Are you going home now—it's late?'

'If you really want me to go,' said Jonah resentfully, 'I'll go.'

'It's late, I'm tired, I don't want to talk any more.'

'What time is it?'

'Does your mother wait up for you?'

'Usually. She says she can't sleep until she knows I'm home safely.'

'That's very nice.'

'I don't see why it's so strange to you. She doesn't know

I'm in the same house. For all she knows, I may be anywhere.'

'Unprotected.'

'I don't understand you at all, Susan—we were getting along so well.'

'I'm sure you don't. It's not your fault.' Susan went to the door and opened it. 'Let's just leave it there, shall we?'

'I hope you're in a better mood tomorrow,' said Jonah.

'Tomorrow?' Susan smiled slightly. 'Oh, yes, tomorrow, things will be very different.' She looked up at him. 'I can understand a mother worrying. I'd worry if I were your mother.'

PART FIVE

When Susan woke next morning she felt wretched. Her mind was full of unpleasant thoughts. She tried to put Jonah, and her disappointment, out of her mind; with such feelings, it would be impossible for her to cope with the day at all.

She tried to hide in sleep. She pressed her eyes shut, and when she forced herself finally to look at the watch on the bedside table, it was late. There was nothing for her to look forward to, that day, or, so it seemed to her, in the whole of her life to come. She dreaded the day, and shuddered at the prospect of her future life. She could not imagine what was going to become of her. She pushed back the bedclothes, and stood blinking against the light—she put on her candlewick dressing-gown, and while the kettle boiled, washed herself.

On her face were traces of the make-up of the day before. Jonah came brightly into her mind. She had hoped for so much from him.

There was no time for breakfast, only for tea and a roll. She dressed while she drank the tea, and when she had finished looked at herself in the mirror. She hardly cared how she looked—there was no-one to dress up for. No-one cared whether she lived or died.

She looked out at the weather. It was a question of decid-

ing if it was worth taking an umbrella with her, or should she risk getting soaked. She hated carrying parcels in the tube; it was enough being jostled without having parcels to carry as well. Frederika never had to worry about rain. She could order a taxi. She could wait till it stopped raining, or go out another day instead.

Susan decided not to take an umbrella with her—but before she went out, she wrapped up a skirt in a bag, hurriedly. She would have to take it to be cleaned in her lunch hour.

As she went out, she looked back at her untidy, shabby flat, with the bed unmade. In her mind's eye, she saw Frederika's luxurious room, a haven from the world. She took the garbage pail down the stairs with her, and left it outside the front door for the dustman.

Susan was not lucky enough to get a seat in the tube. She had to stand, with her parcel under her arm, and was jostled. When she changed at Gloucester Road, she was no more fortunate. Emerging into the light again in Knightsbridge, she was able at least to congratulate herself that it had not come on to rain, and that she had been spared the unnecessary bother of an umbrella.

She was late for work: but Leo did not arrive until ten o'clock. His eye sought her out immediately: she was conscious of his concern for her as soon as she saw him in the distance. He padded across to her, as discreetly as he could, and spoke to her as though she had suddenly become fragile. She felt like an invalid; he created about her the artificial calm of a sick-room.

'I want to speak to you,' he said, taking her arm. 'Will you come down with me to the restaurant? We'll talk over coffee.'

'Something wrong?' she asked.

'No,' he replied. His tone, his manner, belied his word.
'It's nothing important.'

He did not speak as they negotiated the path through various departments to the restaurant.

Over the table, Leo took her hand. She raised her eyes.

Leo looked about him. There were people dotted about the restaurant, though it was not crowded. He turned to Susan helplessly.

'Look,' he said. 'I'm sorry. We can't talk here after all. What I have to say is. . . .'

'Yes?'

'Personal, delicate,' he said, apparently finding it difficult to manage words which had not often in his adult life been on his lips.

Susan was grateful for the concern he expressed for her. She was sorry she had not put on her make-up more carefully that morning. It was wonderful to be with someone, anyone who really cared, who did not merely pretend to care. Not that Leo was just anyone. He was valued, a friend. In her mind, without thinking about it, she had always regarded him as someone she could rely on.

'When can we see each other?' Leo was saying.

Susan found it more and more difficult to take in his meaning. She was drawn to him by the strong feeling he showed. She began to be overwhelmed by it. He had been up to now a middle-aged man, and in his attitude to herself slightly ridiculous. Without knowing exactly what he meant to express, she had felt that he was confused, perhaps a little fearful. He wasn't ridiculous now. He was serious. He was protective. He was thinking of her, not of himself. This made him more of a man than she had ever thought him.

Susan began to realise how much she had been missing in life.

'We must see each other to talk,' he said. 'I can't take you to supper tonight. I must go home to my wife. She's expecting me. I was out last night.'

'Of course,' said Susan. 'If you're expected, you must go home.'

'But we must meet. Are you in a rush to get away tonight? Will you have a drink with me—as soon as we close?'

'Thank you,' said Susan. 'Look,' it was her turn to be concerned. 'I hope it's nothing serious. Please don't worry.'

'Dear child,' he replied. 'It's you I'm worried about—and you worry about me! You're too considerate!'

During the day, Susan pondered. She could not imagine what Leo had to say to her so urgently. She looked forward to seeing him alone, nonetheless. Thus preoccupied, her day passed more quickly, and more happily than she could possibly have expected when she first woke.

Leo took her to a pub nearby. At the back of the pub there were tables in separate alcoves, dimly lit by imitation beacons of thick, twisted red glass. The benches were of deep red velvet. There were intimations of luxury. Leo took her hand across the table.

'Susan,' he said. 'What I'm going to tell you may upset you—but I think you have to know. It will be better for you in the long run. I had dinner with Jonah's mother last night. As you know, she is an old friend of mine.' Susan nodded. 'She and her son are staying with a man called Gray Linton—in the same house as you, isn't that right? I don't suppose it had ever occurred to you to wonder why they were staying in this man's flat?'

Susan shrugged.

'I imagined he was a relative.'

'I wasn't as naïve as that,' said Leo. 'I assumed he was a lover of Frederika's.'

'So she's that kind of woman,' said Susan. She looked at Leo with new interest.

'Yes,' he said impatiently. 'But I was wrong.' He paused. 'Gray Linton isn't Frederika's lover—he's Jonah's lover. I hate having to tell you. I hope you're not involved with the boy.'

Leo gulped his drink. He tried to judge what effect his words had had. Susan felt a sudden shock of nausea. She looked down at her glass.

'I didn't know that,' she said. 'But I'm not surprised to hear it. Not really surprised.' She looked up. 'In fact, I think I should have guessed it was something like that. Thank you for telling me. It was nice of you to take the trouble. I wish I'd known earlier. At least it makes me feel that there's not something wrong with me. Poor Jonah. He's lonely. I'm lonely too. I wish I'd never met him.'

'Did you go to their flat?'

'Yes, once.'

'Awful, isn't it?'

'Yes,' said Susan cautiously. 'I should have known then, shouldn't I?'

They were silent, busy each with his own thoughts. Leo pressed her hand several times. He ordered another round of drinks.

'I did right to tell you, didn't I?' he asked.

'It was sweet of you.'

'You're not too upset?'

'I've been silly. I wish I'd known before, that's all. It's over now.'

Leo sighed deeply, and drank more. He looked across the table at her covertly, plucking up courage.

'Susan?' he said suddenly.

'Yes.'

'Susan, I don't know what you think of me. Married men can be strange. I know that I used to flirt with you—you probably found it very irritating.'

'No—you were always sweet,' said Susan, not very convincingly.

'It's hard to explain. I married late. It's easy to feel closed in in a marriage. You were young, attractive,'—he paused, but Susan did not lower her eyes—'I suppose I'm an old man to you. I'm not really an old man. My heart's not used up—I tell you, at this moment I feel it's never been used at all. I never knew I could feel so much. Oh God, I'm talking like an old man. You must think I'm ridiculous. You'll twist me round your little finger.'

'I don't think you're at all ridiculous,' said Susan gravely.

'I think I love you, Susan. I've always been attracted to you, but that's something else. This is new. I'm sure—I love you. I can't bear all this happening to you.'

'Not so much has happened really,' said Susan gently.

'I don't want you exposed to all this nastiness!' he said violently. 'I want to take you away from it all! God, that sounds so conventional—but I don't care, I mean it.' He put his hand to her face. 'You're so young—there's no one to take care of you. You look tired today.'

'I didn't sleep well,' Susan admitted.

'I don't think you ought to see Jonah and his mother any more. You mustn't go on living in that house—it's dangerous. And I want you to give up your job here. A girl like you can't go on being a shop-girl for ever.'

'I hope I won't be one for ever,' said Susan, wonderingly. 'No girl wants to work for ever. One day, who knows . . . perhaps I'll marry, you never know.'

She spoke listlessly, with little conviction.

'You don't understand,' said Leo. 'Unless you don't want to understand. I want to take a flat for you. I'm not just asking you on impulse. I've thought it out. I can afford to keep you decently. I've got money my wife doesn't know about. It's the only way. You see, I love you, Susan. You won't have to go back to that house—you won't have to work any more.'

They were holding hands now, just another quiet couple in the pub, and not by any means an incongruous one.

'I don't know,' said Susan, 'whether or not I should be offended. I was brought up correctly. My father would have been surprised to see me here, listening to you. He could never have imagined such a scene, and his daughter a part of it.'

'But I'm not offended. The world has moved on since my father's day. But Leo,' and she pressed his hand, 'I can't accept. I can't possibly become a kept woman at my age.'

'Dear Susan—I didn't mean it like that. It's what you need now. One day no doubt you'll meet someone else. I'd always let you go, you know that. I'm not a villain.'

'Leo—I think all men think they're not villains. Some of them are though. I'm not suggesting you're a villain. But the answer is still—no. But thank you.'

She pressed his hand again, and got up to go.

'Your wife, remember? She's waiting for you.'

Leo bowed silently, as though Susan had rebuked him.

He called her a cab, and gave her a note for the fare. She accepted it, without taking her eyes off his face. He stood on

the pavement as the cab drove away, and watched till it was lost to sight.

Her flat, when she reached it, seemed to Susan emptier than ever, and she could not bear to see the untidiness. Tired as she was, she began to tidy it. When she had finished, she was no happier. She was not hungry. In any case, there was very little food in the flat. She didn't want to read. There was nothing she wanted to do to pass the evening, no one she wanted to see. And tomorrow, just like any day, she would be back at work.

She went to the window. She opened it, and breathed the evening air. She looked out on the crescent, and stood watching the light fade over London. There were few people in the crescent. She wondered whether she was not hoping to catch a glimpse of Jonah, whether she was not in fact still longing for him, though she hoped desperately not to see him ever again.

Her heart leaped when the bell rang. She knew it was Jonah—it could be no one else. She steeled herself for what she was determined would be her last interview with him.

'Are you alone?' he asked, when she opened the door. He lounged easily in the doorway, confident of his charm.

'Yes,' she said. 'Come in.'

She stood aside to let him pass, and closed the door behind him.

He wandered about for a moment, getting his bearings. He seemed perfectly at home. She was glad she had tidied the flat. But she had to remind herself that he only liked men. He could have no place in her life.

'I didn't expect to see you again,' she said.

'No?' He was surprised. 'Anything I've done wrong?'

'No. You've done nothing.'

Jonah shrugged uneasily. He did not ask her what she meant.

'Do you feel like going out?' he asked. 'We could have a drink, or go to a coffee-bar.'

'Jonah—what do you want with me?'

Jonah went to the window, and looked out on the crescent. The sky was growing dark.

'Did mother tell you?' he asked, his back to her.

'No.' Susan found it hard to breathe. She felt wretched.

At the window, Jonah seemed so slight, so vulnerable, with his narrow shoulders. She knew that any chance word from her could hurt and harm him. He would remember her all his life.

'Your mother didn't tell me. Leo told me.'

'Who's Leo?'

'Don't you know? He's the man I work for. It so happens that he is also an old friend of your mother's. He had dinner in your flat yesterday. I don't think your mother told him anything. He just guessed. It doesn't make any difference though. I haven't learned anything that makes the slightest difference. Because in the first place there is nothing between us at all. I made a mistake. It's all my fault. You've got nothing to blame yourself for.'

Jonah turned. Susan felt for him because he was so young.

'I suppose you know,' he said, 'that nothing down there means anything to me. I like being with you. Would it make any difference to you if I gave up that life?'

Susan stepped back, away from him.

'No—it wouldn't. Please go. Go away. Leave me alone. I'm unhappy enough as it is. Please don't make it worse for me. I don't want to talk any more. Please, please go.'

'You really don't want me?' His body was growing tight, and Susan felt that she was hearing his real voice for the first time. She was appalled by what she heard in it of misery and violence.

'Jonah—I can't help you.' She put out her hand to ward him off though he made no move towards her. 'You frighten me.'

'Why?' Jonah was genuinely surprised. 'It's the last thing I want to do.'

'If I were stronger, I might be able to do something. I feel so helpless. Don't you understand yourself at all? You don't care about me, not a scrap.'

'I do, I do,' Jonah protested.

'No, you don't!' Susan began to raise her voice. 'It's not me you care about. You don't care about anyone—only your mother. She is the only one who moves you. You're only alive to her, you only feel when you're with her. You're interested in no other person in the world. Can't you see that? You must leave me alone. You must go away from me. You must never go to anyone else ever again—it's not right. People are wretched enough in the world as it is. You'll only make it worse for them. You only want your mother. Go to her, please. Leave me alone.'

Jonah was standing against the open window. His features were in shadow. His body seemed to grow into itself, to become smaller.

'No, no, no,' he cried, throwing back his head.

He launched himself across the room towards her. He knelt at her feet, buried his face in her lap.

'I want to hide,' he said. 'I must get away from all this!'

She looked down at him, and laid her hand gently on his head.

'Jonah,' she said, 'I'm sorry. I didn't mean to talk like this. There's no point in talking. I'm going away now, going away from here for good. I want to forget everything. Leo has offered me a flat. I've decided to take it. I can't bear it here any more.'

Jonah raised his head. There were tears in his eyes.

'I wish you wouldn't,' he said. 'It would be such a waste.'

'Thank you,' she said wonderingly. 'I know how difficult it is for you to be interested in others. But it's too late now. I've decided.'

'What am I going to do?'

Jonah rose to his feet. He wiped his eyes.

Susan took his face between her hands and pulled it down towards her. She kissed him gently on the forehead.

'Go to your mother,' she said. 'Where else should you go?'

The scene dissolved before his eyes. Susan was far, far away. He withdrew silently, and let himself out of the flat.

Frederika was in the sitting-room. She was in a chair, motionless, with her hands folded. She had not turned the light on. He came into the room without a sound, but she sensed his presence at once. She rose, and turned to him. The music roared in his ears. She was outlined against the window at the other end of the room, with its night-sky.

'Don't move, mother,' Jonah said. 'There are stars in your hair. I see you in the universe.'

Frederika was still, she was a body in space, fixed.

'Have a care, Jonah,' she said without expression.

'My heart aches,' said Jonah. 'Why did Susan have to know about our life here? Why did she have to know about us, mother?'

'I was frightened of her,' said Frederika. She held nothing

back. 'I hated her, how much you cannot know. You have to live a long life to store up such hatred. For a while I thought it was possible you might leave me. Every thought that you gave to her and not to me took you from me. I cannot spare a single thought. Out of their own flesh mothers give their sons to the light, and later the world snatches those sons away. I do not understand mothers who can countenance such a thing. They have no feeling, these mothers.'

'It is in nature,' said Jonah.

'And I defy nature!'

'Mother. I could never have had her. I would never have been lost to you. Why did she have to suffer? I wished her well. We have spoiled her life, you and I.'

'I wasn't sure of you. I was frightened. Besides, things had to happen quickly. I made them happen. I won't waste time. Life is made up of days, and we cannot spare days. Soon, we shall move on. We have used up our time here. You had to be separated from this girl. In a way, I'm grateful to Susan. There had to be a girl in your life, sometime, so you could come to know yourself. Never again will there be anyone else in your life. Susan is of no account.'

'Will there be no one?'

'No one. Ever. Only ourselves. We know what we are!'

Jonah walked towards his mother. She did not flinch.

His arms were limp at his sides. All his limbs were useless. His legs seemed not capable of carrying him. Yet he came nearer to his mother. His hands were too heavy to lift. But there was a moment, and his hands were at his mother's neck, squeezing. In his fingers was a joyful power. His fingers sang.

His mother's face was in darkness. But his soul flashed lightning: there was a fiery glimpse of his mother's features, strained beyond endurance in anguish and ecstasy. There

would be darkness again, over all. His hands pressed harder, and she was a weightless marionette. It was dark, his soul was steeped in dark, dark was his only friend. Again the darkness was illumined by his mother's ecstatic face, and again darkness covered all.

His hands fell to his sides. Frederika collapsed to the carpet. He knelt, and gathered her in his arms, they were in the world, and together. Her eyes were closed.

'Mother,' he said gently, 'It's all right. I'm here. You'll never be alone now. But I, what will I be when you die? When your soul leaves your body, when your essence leaves the world, it must not go into the universe whence it came, or dip its wings into the waters of forgetfulness and find peace —no you can have no peace, and I in torment, your essence must return to inhabit my frame, uniting with my essence, until the day I die. A single essence of Jonah and Frederika will that day be launched on the universe, where once upon a time it was one essence. Then, mother, we will find peace, you and I, mother, together. Then, and not now. Now, we are in the world, you and I.'

Frederika stirred—she struggled to rise, and with a helpless convulsive movement subsided, and lay content in her son's arms. She sighed. Jonah listened to her breathe. There was another music in his head now, a music of joy, of kettle-drums and tambours. She turned her head and pressed it to his breast, which rose and fell with her breathing, so that they breathed together, as one.

EPILOGUE

Leo opened the door of the flat he had rented for Susan; it was a solemn moment for him. He took Susan's arm, about to propel her, gently, into the flat. It was for her too a solemn moment. She hung back. He looked at her questioningly. She lowered her head, disengaged herself also gently, and slid past him, without touching him, into her flat.

She looked over the whole flat. She found her own way; it did not seem to occur to her that it would be a keen delight for Leo to reveal it to her, room by small room.

In the last room, she stopped. He was at her elbow.

'There are one or two things I'll still be needing,' she said.

'Of course, of course,' he said anxiously. 'I'll get you whatever you want. Bit by bit, of course. But I promise you, everything you want you'll have.'

Susan ran her hand over the bed-head. She smoothed the bed-covering. She leaned against the curtains, and rubbed the material against her cheek charmingly, smiling at Leo the while.

'So you do like it?' he said.

He went to her. He touched her hand. He smiled back at her, shyly, and took her in his arms. She fitted snugly in his arms. She was made for him. He buried his face in her hair.

'I've a fetish for girls' hair,' he said.

He breathed deeply, he enjoyed her odour, he breathed deeply of her odour, and the odour of a love-nest. It was like the end of a long journey.

'I promise you,' he repeated. 'You're a wonderful girl. You must have everything you want. You deserve it.'

'You mustn't rush me,' she said, laughing lightly. She put her hand on his chest. But she did not push him away. 'My,' she said, 'you're strong. You great fat thing. That's a term of affection,' she added quickly. 'Don't be cross.'

Leo kissed her passionately on the mouth.

'You can't wait, can you?' she said, looking at him, wondering at his feeling for her.

'I want you so much.'

'And I suppose,' said Susan, 'you have to be going to your wife fairly soon—or can you stay tonight?'

'Well,' said Leo between kisses, 'I should.' And he kissed her again longer. 'I should go home tonight. But another night . . . we'll have the whole night for ourselves.'

Susan gave him more time.

'There is my luggage,' she said. 'I'd like to move in properly now.'

'Yes,' he said, 'Yes—whatever you like.'

Susan moved away. She looked around her, including Leo in her survey of what was hers.

Leo followed her. She sat down on the bed. She leaned back and looked up at the ceiling when Leo came at her again.

Gray opened his shop in Beauchamp Place. He looked round the shop—the objects were arranged with care to fill the space, but it saddened him to see how his stock had dwindled. His shop through the years had been more than a way of mak-

ing money—it had been a scene of his life. The objects from ages past had the dignity of use, and comforted him; they helped to create the illusion of a world in which past and present were one, a world apart which was a refuge from time.

He went straight through to the room behind the shop. His assistant, picking up letters from the floor, followed him. Gray would not open the letters while the assistant was standing over him. He glanced down at them as he held them in his hand. He could see that there were many bills among them.

'Why,' he said to himself, 'must my assistant always wear black? I've told him before, today people wear more casual clothes! He's like an Emissary of Death.'

Gray spent his day among objects from many centuries, and his thoughts roamed. He put the bills into his pockets, and took no notice of the world passing outside the shop. He was worried by too much space, too much emptiness, even in the small room behind the shop, even in the shop itself, where the objects were slipping away from each other, leaving him exposed, to time, to the world, to the universe.

In the evening he looked round the shop, turned the light out, and locked the door. He returned to his flat to find Frederika standing at the mantelpiece, her gloves stretched tight, without a crease, over her slender, sensitive fingers.

'I'm going now, Gray,' she said. 'Jonah's already gone. We've taken all our belongings. Here are the keys.'

She lifted them for him to see, and placed them on the mantelpiece.

Slowly, Gray looked from her to the keys, avoiding her face. Slowly he lowered himself into an armchair. He did

not speak at once, for sentences, as they formed in his head, seemed hardly worth the uttering.

'Jonah should have said goodbye,' were the words he finally chose.

'There was no point in saying goodbye to you,' said Frederika, 'when I am here to say goodbye for both.'

Gray watched her gloves.

'Not hands,' he thought. 'She hasn't hands. She has talons.'

'Goodbye,' said Frederika, 'is the only word that needs saying. We have always understood each other. As you know, we owe you nothing—now you have nothing to give us, and we are going.'

Leo bowed his head, and did not answer.

'If there is a further word needed,' said Frederika, 'which I doubt, it is only this. You allowed Jonah to get involved with this girl. I did not want that. Now that is over. You did not, as it turned out, do any harm. Rather the contrary. But you took too much on yourself. You are a small man, who must not try to play in life the role of a big man. To do that is to invite disaster.'

'It is too late now,' said Gray, 'for me to learn new lessons.'

Soon he was alone in his flat. Frederika was speeding across London to Jonah, who awaited her coming in a large hotel.

'I do like a large hotel,' she thought, as she stepped out of a cab. 'I can't breathe properly in little ones.'

She stepped into the foyer. Her foot responded gratefully to the excellent pile of the carpet. There were alert people in the desk. Well-dressed visitors stood about. She thrilled to the expensiveness of it.

'I could never be bored,' she thought, 'where there is

money about. The moment I'm bored in surroundings of luxury, I'll know that I'm dead, and they've put me in the most expensive suite in hell.

'Oh, there he is!'

She watched Jonah approach her.

'Darling,' she cried. 'You look so wonderful. I see your recent experiences have made no impact on your simply astounding good looks.' She looked about her. 'It's good to be here; it's like coming home. Kensington indeed! I'm so glad you suggested that we go to a really good hotel. We can't really afford it yet, but I'm not worried about the future now. I'm not worried at all.'

'It was really you, mother, who suggested it.'

'Was it? I was sure it was you. Well, it was a good idea, whoever suggested it. You liked it too, didn't you, the moment you set eyes on it? Have you met anybody yet? There seem to be very promising people about!'

'I've hardly got my bearings yet, mother.'

'Really Jonah!' Frederika wagged her finger at him. 'You must learn to use your wits. God didn't give you good looks for nothing, you know. They say He has a purpose in everything!'

'Don't be impatient. I won't disgrace you.'

'Oh, Jonah!' cried Frederika. 'I was almost forgetting. What do you think! I've got tickets for the opera. Yes, I knew that would please you. I don't know what's on—but does it really matter? It would be so delightful if . . . I'd feel almost sentimental if it were dear old *Sonnambula*! How long ago it all seems! Darling, you've been so difficult. Mind you, we've both changed. Oh, darling, I'm so looking forward. We must go and change now. I hate to be late. I can't bear to miss a thing! Oh, I've such high hopes,

for tonight, for every night! Come along, darling, do hurry!'

Frederika was excited at the prospect of being once more out in the world, trying her fortune. Her expectations mounted: she felt quite feverish, as, Jonah beside her, in yet another taxi, she sped once more through London streets. He handed her down from the taxi, and she hurried over the pavement into the opera house, shielding her face.

'Too much light,' she laughed, 'far too much light.'

Her eyes darted everywhere—on her long neck, her head was never still. She took in the whole scene, as from a great height.

'Darling,' she whispered, 'I think I see someone. Look, standing over there, darling, you're not looking in the right direction, there!'

'I think I see,' said Jonah.

'You mustn't be nervous, just be natural. Trust me, I'll be with you. I won't let you down. Now then, your lovely bright smile.'

'Don't fuss, mother—I'm not a complete idiot! Everything is going to be all right.'